WHERE THE WATER IS

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Contents

Abstract

In 2013, Anjoli Roy discovered a family secret that shouldn't have been a secret at all: her great grandfather's friendship with Mahatma Gandhi. As she struggles to make sense of this hidden part of her family's past, Roy must also navigate her complicated relationship with her conservative Bengali father, her white mother, and the southern California community that doesn't know what to make of her biracial family. This uncovered secret launches a hunt for buried family histories that features the enduring presence of ancestors in our lives, the connection between hereditary illnesses and intergenerational traumas, and the mystery of why some stories get passed down while others are suppressed.

This creative nonfiction collection features stories of growing up ambiguously brown in southern California, chronic illnesses that connect us to long-gone family members, the narrow threshold between birth and death, and a roots journey to India to recover the story of a great-grandfather turned freedom fighter who was at risk of being forgotten. These stories ask how family narratives define us, what happens when stories are buried and what happens when they are dug up, and how the legacies of colonization, imprisonment, emigration, participation in the US military, domestic violence, suicide, and racism lodge in descendants' psyches and bodies. Roy's narrative suggests that rebuilding familial connections through learning these stories may be the key to healing.

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I am incredibly grateful to have been able to write these stories in Hawai'i. Decolonizing movements here to recover historical and genealogical memory continue to teach me in a myriad of ways not only about living in Oceania and what it means to work to ally with sovereignty movements here, but also in understanding how seemingly lost histories and family connections can, in fact, be restored.

Countless friends have also held me—emotionally and physically—when I was writing these texts in hotel rooms in India or while (sometimes sobbing) in coffee shops in Honolulu, including but not limited to Aiko, Bryan, Christina, Dax, Donovan, Jessica, Lee, Marion, No'u, and Rajiv. Thank you to the baristas who didn't seem to mind how I lingered until thirty seconds before closing and perhaps understood that the best ideas come right before you're kicked to the proverbial curb. Shout out to Island Brew Coffeehouse (Kaimuki and Hawaii Kai locations), Blue Tree Café, and Glazers.

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To my family, in India and in the US, whose stories these are, thank you for your patience with me as I wrote this. Thank you for trusting me to write this version of our stories.

Introduction

Why Creative Nonfiction?

I arrived to my position as a writer of creative nonfiction by accident. I'd written some pretty terrible poetry in middle school and decided that fiction was where it was at. I'd always been a reader of fiction but, while works by Margaret L'Engle, Sandra Cisneros, Edwidge Danticat, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Arundhati Roy fed me stories with strong female protagonists with enduring connections to their families, I found the experiences of mixed-race South Asian American folks nowhere. I wanted to write into that void. However, as much as I tried to write fiction, my stories kept getting anchored to my family, to my experience, butting up against the limits of my knowledge. I struggled to write my master's thesis, a novel about a mixed-race Bengali American woman—my obvious authorial stand-in—because of my lack of cultural knowledge about India. How could I write the characters who were supposed to have been born and raised in India when I knew so few Indians? I didn't even really know the Indians in my own family. The novel, ironically (or not) was supposed to be about that very limitation, as illustrated by the mistakes my protagonist was supposed to make in the narrative. In addition to being mixed race, I wanted to write about a girl's relationship to her closed-off but loving brown father, her absent white mom, experiences of colorism in the South Asian American community, and the culture that is passed down wordlessly, misunderstood by a naïve, mixed South Asian American daughter. In a sense, I wanted the reader to laugh at the protagonist/me. I wanted to foreground all the protagonist's/my shortcomings. I wanted to be the first one to call them out so I couldn't be called a fraud because I was calling myself a fraud already. To pull this off in fiction, I needed to know more than my protagonist, which I did not. Without Bengali, for example, I couldn't convincingly pull off writing conversations in English that really were taking place in Bengali.

And while I had taken a few South Asian history courses that gave me small windows, via classroom learning, into the culture I felt completely walled off from as a child, I struggled to set fictional stories in motion against a backdrop of South Asian or South Asian American cultural identity.

I was surprised to discover how much easier it was to write on the themes mapped above in creative nonfiction. In creative nonfiction, I felt I could relax into my limitations as the author. Because I am the protagonist, I could let go of the requirement to know more than my protagonist does, even as I continue to work to learn more about my family's histories and about mixed-race South Asian/South Asian American history and cultural identity in general. And yet, of course, creative nonfiction brings all of its own challenges to the table.

The What and How of Creative Nonfiction

When I decided I wanted to write our family's stories, years before I started writing this dissertation, I grappled with how to write what I considered to be collaborative creative nonfiction stories. The stories were necessarily collaborative because, through "augmenting" memory (as I discuss below), I drew from my family members' memories as well as their versions of the stories I was writing. While the stories I was writing were grounded in the insights and limitations of my perspective, they were also stories that extended beyond what I witnessed firsthand, including the stories that were passed down to me orally about older family members I never knew or events that, as the youngest in my nuclear family, I was not yet around to witness. The technique I therefore used in writing these stories oftentimes involved drafting a story I knew from memory and then emailing it to my sisters and then my parents. Objections and clarifications would appear in tracked changes in the margins. Sometimes I would sit down

with a tape recorder and ask family members questions. Sometimes these interviews were formal and included my submitting written questions to the interviewee ahead of time, producing transcriptions, and then writing from those transcriptions. Other times, recorded interviews were more performance than storytelling tool. Sometimes, the performance of an interview made it into the stories. After the interview, I'd repeat the same process as above for help from my family in sanding down rough edges, for making sure I was getting things "right," a definition that my family and I seemed to settle on together. This idea of "right" is elusive, of course. I find Norma Tilden's formulation helpful in thinking through this elusiveness: "Creative nonfiction," she says, "is a kind of literary thrifting; the story is never quite your own. In its engagement with facts, creative nonfiction is the genre of secondhand things. Its language, too, comes to the writer secondhand. You never know where it's been" (710). And, yet, I have cobbled together this secondhand language from its various sources—memory, interview, or gossip—to produce creative nonfiction stories that I have had to answer for and to. While I actively sought out my family's approval in how I told a story, I was also the only one undertaking the mechanics of writing these stories and determining their overall shape. Thus, even though these stories in many ways belong to all of us, containing as they do our multitude of voices, the actual writing of these collaborative stories has been my individual project.

The process of writing collaborative creative nonfiction stories required that I navigate the expansiveness and limitations of creative nonfiction as a genre. The expansiveness lay in how I wanted to tell these stories—the literary techniques and the cobbling together of memories. The limitations walled off the text's relationship to truth. For example, how could I prove something happened that no one else remembered? I found in this genre the central tension of how I wanted to tell these stories. I decided to write these stories under the genre heading of

creative nonfiction because, while the word *nonfiction* indicates that there is some dimension of veracity to these stories, that I am writing about real people, places, and occurrences, the word *creative* underscores how this genre prioritizes storytelling and takes up literary techniques as central to its purpose. This working definition of creative nonfiction was attractive to me because while I committed my family's stories to the page, I also wanted to tell a "good" story, a story that a general audience could connect with and that engaged literary techniques that are common in prose. Lee Gutkind has said that creative nonfiction must be literary, a claim he expands upon by saying that it must use "scenes, dialogue, description, first-person point of view—all the tools available to the fiction writer, while consistently attempting to be truthful and factual" (201). Gutkind clarifies his definition further when he states that, "instead of reporting," writers of creative nonfiction "capture and/or recreate" (204). Capturing and recreating are creative acts. Another useful definition of the genre comes from Douglas Hesse, who outlines what he calls "creative nonfiction's epistemological trusses" (239). Hesse states, in creative nonfiction "reality is mediated and narrativized," and "language and form must have a surface and texture that remind readers that the work is artificed" (239). Hesse goes on to say, "even though some readers are considerably more adept and enculturated, the work is not reserved for a narrow specialist audience" (239). Thus, in drawing on Gutkind and Hesse, I strive to appeal to a general readership through the use of these literary techniques, even while I know that close readers of creative nonfiction will be rightly suspicious of, for example, long stretches of unrecorded dialogue (more on this below). Thus, I have elected to use the heading of creative nonfiction as an umbrella term because the stories in this dissertation both take up creative nonfiction's subgenres of memoir, which focuses on the writer's own life, and elements of literary journalism,

which is more outwardly focused and includes more techniques that I utilized in my hunt for my ancestor Kali Nath Roy's story in digital, paper, and human archives.

Dinty W. Moore's text, *The Truth of the Matter: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction*, has also been instructive for me throughout graduate school in helping me understand my relationship to the craft element of this form of storytelling. As Moore states, creative nonfiction utilizes as its core the following techniques: detail and description, characterization through dialogue and action, point of view, voice, and discovery. Detail and description emerged from observing memory, which involved sitting with memories I wanted to write about to try to recall those memories in fuller form. As Moore states, "with each recalled detail more details seem to pop up from the deeper pools of your memory bank" (22). Thus, as I worked to recall details of moments and exchanges, more details of those memories emerged. I also worked to "augment" memories (23). I revisited pictures and physical locations, my old blog and journal entries, and I talked informally with and tape recorded family members in an effort to fact-check or deepen a story. I tried to ground these stories in concrete sensory details so as to distinguish them from, for example, strictly factual retellings that might be devoid of evocative imagery or emotive engagement. In revising for detail and description, I read my stories aloud to myself over and over again, listening for the literary dimension of the language just as I was trying to make sure I was getting the stories into a shape that felt right to me.

Because the people in my stories are real, I wanted to be careful in the ways that I was rendering them to the page. This process, of moving someone from the real to the page, is also a process of turning them into characters that the reader observes closely. We are trained as readers to draw conclusions about characters based on their words and their actions. While dialogue is perhaps the most powerful way to characterize someone, the challenge in writing dialogue in

creative nonfiction is that memory is faulty, and it's unethical to make up dialogue—*and* to put that fictional dialogue into quotation marks that suggest the dialogue is one hundred percent accurate. To address this challenge, I drew from Moore's recommendations again: first, I reminded myself that while I might not be able to remember exactly what, say, my grandmother said in a specific, unrecorded conversation, I could recall her cadence and her most common turns of phrase and what she was trying to communicate to me. I could recreate this dialogue as someone who knew and witnessed her closely (Moore 32). Second, I recorded conversations with family members both to augment memory and to grab at those cadences and turns of phrase. I found that while I rarely revisited the actual recordings of these interviews, the process of interviewing family members not only allowed me to hear how they made sense of important occurrences such as my parents' divorce, it also helped me to hear each of my family members' unique turns of phrase. Furthermore, these recordings helped to remind my family members that the stories they were telling me were intended for stories that I would write for a broader audience. They could therefore shape the stories in whatever ways they felt comfortable with, with that broader audience in mind.

To develop characterization through action, I tried to write scenes that allowed the reader to draw conclusions on their own about the characters I was writing. This readerly desire to see for our own eyes—to be shown rather than told through the obvious tinge of the writer's perspective—is a ludicrous endeavor in creative nonfiction, since we as the writers control how we curate these characters, these real people who impact the story. We present the words, we show the characters sending us to fetch the sandesh from the fridge rather than answering a basic question about our ethnic identity, and this portrayal gives the reader who is not attuned to creative nonfiction storytelling conventions the false impression that they are witnessing an

unbiased account. Nevertheless, I continued in the track of trying to show more than tell in the majority of these stories because I believe that doing so is a powerful dimension of energetic storytelling—of showing in scene rather than telling in summary. That said, I also engaged with a fair bit of telling in my dissertation, because retrospective understanding adds another layer to how the people in these stories are characterized. Retrospective understanding also helps to characterize me, the author, narrator, and protagonist of these stories.

Similar to how the people I write are characterized on the page, I acknowledge that within Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact," I am, as the writer, narrator, and protagonist of these stories, also a character on the page within this genre of creative nonfiction. I too am characterized by voice—which arises in the words I choose within these stories. How I narrate these stories and my distinct turns of phrase, in addition to how I understand or position situations is what the reader draws upon to make conclusions about me as a character. By using phrases like "wiling out," for example, I am evoking a teenager's turn of phrase from the late-nineties in southern California. In addition to word choice, Craig has pointed out to me that what I choose to omit or shift focus away from via narrative withholding or understatement also invites a readerly critique of how I, the author, am understood as a character—these techniques hint at my values, priorities, and what I as a character want to foreground.

The point of view I utilize also reveals more of my character and is also important to how I worked to shape these stories. While I primarily tried to utilize an intimate first-person point of view that provides access to my thoughts and perceptions, both in the moment and from my retrospective perspective, I also occasionally used the second person to describe instances that are more emotionally charged than others. I agree with Moore when he states that second person "creates a direct connection and immediacy for the reader" (47) in that it can be read as a

command. Second person also can create emotional distance, or a triangulation, in that the actions of the story are being projected onto the reader by the author. I tried to utilize second person only in rare instances so as to preserve its potency. Examples of my use of the second person arise in stories like "Heart Break Body," which is about my dad's heart surgery. In addition to an intimate first-person point of view and the occasional use of second person, a more academic point of view cropped up in other stories, perhaps most specifically in "Induction." While I initially tried to drain from this story the academic voice I had used in the story's incarnation as panel papers I presented in two symposia, I eventually came to see that this more distanced academic voice was useful in illustrating the various modes I have entered in trying to make sense of my family. To erase the academic voice completely would be to suppose that that voice is not useful to storytelling, and I am not yet convinced of that. Also, similar to the distancing affect of second person, an academic voice gets at my ongoing struggle to use all of the tools at my disposal to understand better my family in general and my father in particular, which has clearly been part of my academic journey beyond creative writing. My final note on point of view is that everywhere in this dissertation I tried to avoid the trap of omniscient narration. I have avoided stepping into other people's perspectives and instead relied upon pieces of dialogue to give windows into what they have told me that they were thinking or feeling. I have tried to revise out any instances where I may have, however sloppily, thought I had full access to people's private perspectives when I, in fact, did not.

Finally, writing for discovery was an important technique for me in producing these stories. Writing for discovery permits what Brett Lott calls for when he states that creative nonfiction must work to "fin[d] order in chaos *without* reforming chaos into order" (193, emphasis in original). Writing through the early stages of this dissertation felt like chaos to me. I

was not always aware of why I was writing about something, for example, other than the urgency I felt in describing something and putting it alongside other stories in this collection. With the perspective that distance afforded me after I let these pieces rest for a while between drafts, I was able to see that the story I was writing about the apparition of a ghostly gray woman who I saw as a child, for example, was both a story to include because of how it gets at the porousness of memory but also because of how it ties to my great uncle's deceased wife, who also appears near the end of the collection as a gray woman to care for him when he is ill. Putting these stories in the same collection casts a hue across the overall collection that an attentive reader may or may not recognize. To me, there are two ways to read these women. One: the women are ghosts who are seemingly unrelated to one another; they are chaotic; they are unsolved mysteries. Two: the two gray women are the same woman, visiting our family members across decades and vast geographic distances. While only hinted at—I worked to resist the urge to hit the reader over the head with these two ghosts—this secondary reading of the gray woman gets at a larger theme I try to underscore in this collection about ancestral connections and ancestral presences, whether we recognize them at the times they appear or not, a theme that is echoed back in other stories, such as my niece Bodhi's birth and the experience of revisiting my father's childhood home in Kolkata.

Diverging from Protocol

Until I formally started to write this dissertation, I wrote collaborative creative nonfiction stories, as described above. My experience of writing this dissertation diverged a bit from the protocol described above, largely because of the recommendation of my committee to see what writing on my own might feel like. While I did talk with family members to get clarifying

information and I did conduct interviews during the formal dissertation-writing process, I kept the draft of these stories close to my chest until after the entire committee had read and commented on my complete draft. Therefore, for this dissertation, I wrote collaborative creative nonfiction stories individually. My family became increasingly impatient with this process, I think, not only because I didn't come out and tell them what I was doing (I didn't explain this process to them because I wasn't completely sure what I was doing either). I experienced real feelings of guilt about this silence, having been raised to believe that if I couldn't tell my family about something, and more specifically if I couldn't tell my *sisters* about something, I must be doing something I was ashamed of. But, I appreciated having been able to get some distance and write a bit more on my own during this process. I had to work through to the core emotion of the stories I was trying to tell without my sisters' shepherding, or without my parents there to explain what they had meant to do when I was too little to guess at their perspectives. Of course, sharing the draft with my family at the stage of writing this introduction was also incredibly difficult, because I wrote without their express approval and feedback, which I do want. I understand that the stories will continue to evolve in response to how they have received these stories, but I appreciate the opportunity to write this complete draft on my own too, however difficult it was.

Navigating this process of writing on my own was and is the most difficult part of producing this dissertation for me. Even with all the bureaucratic hurdles I had to jump through in India to access Kali Nath's newspaper articles, even after all the land and ocean we crossed to chase down my dad's childhood ghosts in Kurseong, even with all the physical barriers I experienced to hunt down and research for these stories, withholding this dissertation from my family was my biggest challenge. I say that knowing, of course, that it's easier to recall the

vividness of our most recent challenges when we are just barely on the other side of them, but as I write this I hear my mom's voice in my ears.

She was the second to last person to finish reading my dissertation, and probably the one I was most concerned with regarding how she'd feel about it. So much of the subterranean elements of this dissertation is about our fraught relationship—something I have not really explored in depth in other stories. And even still, as Betsy noted to me, my mom appears in this dissertation only episodically, as an unfaithful wife, an absent or naked mother, or a caretaker. While my mom was reading, I worried about whether I'd been fair to her. A central moment of "Little Red BMW" is the moment when I finally ask her about drinking while she was pregnant with me, a question she skirts. Of course, in the moment of her reading the story about her skirting this question, she couldn't skirt this question again, or at least not as easily. And, yet, it almost happened again. When we finally got on the phone together to talk about the dissertation, she said, "You have broken the family's great tradition of not talking about the stuff that needs to be talked about the most, and I'm proud of you." Then she proceeded to point out typos. It wasn't until I told her how difficult writing this dissertation was for me that she talked directly about the divorce and her absences, or gave me her perspective on why she drank when she was pregnant with me. This conversation didn't resolve these issues miraculously, and I didn't expect it to—storytelling can only do so much—but it was a relief to find that she could hold how I wrote her and that she accepted my perspective.

My dad and my sisters reacted a little differently: they couldn't stop apologizing after they'd finished reading this dissertation. They'd read this collection of stories and found moments where they believed they'd betrayed me or been unforgivably cold or absent. Even with our tendencies to fall on any sword that might be lying around, I was genuinely surprised at

this response. I hadn't written a hit list of all the sad moments, had I? I hadn't portrayed them badly or painted myself as a wronged saint, had I?

Dad finished reading the dissertation on the same day he went to go see his cardiologist. He had kept apologizing to me, for not knowing about what I was going through as a kid, for not being around really until I was away at college, for not getting to know me until we were both adults. I tried to tell him again and again that making him feel bad wasn't my goal—that he *had* been there for us so much when we were kids, that the stories were about my limited perspective as much as it was about growing up to see all of us as complex and imperfect, loving people. I explained to him that I'd discovered in the process of writing the dissertation that if I wanted the good stuff about our family to land—the moments of coming together and love and understanding and healing—I had to talk about the difficult stuff. The painful stuff. To show how far we'd come. And, to be fair, as Cindy has pointed out to me, I still do not dwell on those difficult things even now. But, I told him, we are on this side of things today. We are okay. We're better than okay.

"I was so run down!" Dad said, recalling how he felt when he finished the last page. He said with that laugh that tells me he was still hurting.

"Is writing this helping her health?" his doctor asked him.

An insightful question, I felt, particularly from a western doctor.

Maybe it has, but I'm not sure this process of revealing the dissertation to my family at this late stage has been. And, yet, I'm not sure I'd have been able to get to the same moments of honesty and clarity that I found in writing alone if I hadn't stepped back and written these collaborative creative nonfiction stories individually.

It may be useful to note here that the version of my dissertation in this file contains only twenty-five percent of the stories I submitted to my family for their approval and that my committee passed as my dissertation on September 8, 2017; my committee has agreed to let me withhold the other seventy-five percent here, or the eighteen stories not present in this version of the dissertation, to preserve the text's future publishability. The six texts contained in this version of the dissertation, excluding this introduction, have been previously published in online and print literary journals. A reader of this version of the dissertation will note that much of the content of the dissertation that I comment on in this introduction is not present in this version of the text.

Content

In terms of content, I knew that I wanted to write this dissertation about not only my nuclear family and my aunts and uncle who I had access to growing up, but I also wanted to write about my grandparents on both sides of my family and also to reach beyond them to great-grandparents. I grew up with my mom's parents and had met my maternal great-grandmother, but my dad's side of the family was more out of reach, because of death, geography, and language barriers, which I discuss in the dissertation. We had no other elders from my dad's side of the family in the US. So, my process of exploring/reaching for the Indian side of our family began in classrooms and extended into the formal research trip that I took to India that is the last third of this dissertation.

In the process of piecing together these stories, I struggled with finding a central theme or narrative arc that might hold together these largely self-standing stories. I knew that the India trip resulted in a developing sense of the importance of ancestors and feelings of connectedness, but

it wasn't until well into a revised draft—and after meeting with Shankar and with Shawna—that I realized that for that togetherness to land, I needed to be able to write about the dull ache of loneliness that I felt during childhood regarding my lack of understanding about who my family is and where we came from. I needed to write about the pain of severed memories. Therefore, the central theme and narrative arc that I have tried to imbue within this dissertation is a movement from loneliness to feelings of connectedness and community.

Within this larger theme, I wanted to draw upon a number of other themes, including body memory, illness, and what it means to read the body. I am interested in mental health and emotional needs, how the body connects us to our ancestors via (epi)genetics, and how the body is a place that is given to the descendant who inhabits that body. I am interested in the meaning of illness and whether there *is* always a meaning to illness. I am also interested in the oftentimes gendered relationship to inscription and memory, where the access to the pen is oftentimes masculine (as in Kali Nath's paper archive) and the relationship to the oral is oftentimes feminine. I am interested in themes of being mixed-race in a mostly white world, just as I am interested in writing about my family's own peculiar dysfunctions and our sometimes conflicting relationships to the past. I am grateful to my committee members for underscoring these themes for me.

To access these themes, I worked with the following questions, which I outlined in my prospectus: how does remembering stories—both celebratory and painful—shape who my family is? How do our family narratives define us? What happens when we buck particular stories? When we bury them? What happens when we dig them up? Can these stories make us sick? Can they heal us? Or are we putting too much weight on the power of stories? What is better left unsaid and what must be told? Why, and who decides this? With these questions at center, I

worked to connect, obliquely, to conversations about the legacy of traumas—including colonization, imprisonment, participation in the US military, domestic violence, suicide, and racism. How does this legacy lodge intergenerationally in descendants' psyches, in our bodies? How does family identity intersect and conflict with individual identity? What about when we take into account the rupture of crossing national borders? What do we make of mixed-race bodies?

In this writing, I have hoped to invite the reader to dwell on the larger questions of how stories are told, and how familial experiences have shaped (or perhaps fail to shape) future generations. I have strived to produce stories that contribute meaningfully to conversations invested in the importance of excavating family history and stories we tell, the porousness of memory, mixed-race identity, and South Asian American diaspora.

Influential Texts

To help me write to these themes, I drew upon numerous texts as literary mentors, including Amarnath Ravva's *American Canyon* (2013), Minal Hajratwala's *Leaving India* (2009), Sadia Shepard's *The Girl from Foreign* (2008), Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1993), and Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976). While I could say much about each of these texts, I will remark on them succinctly here.

American Canyon is an inspiring remigration narrative that also speaks in important and artistic ways to how generational trauma is transmitted and persists in our identities and, arguably, in our bodies. Ravva's book centers on the author's quest to heal his mother as she suffers from what he finally names, on the fifth-to-last page of the book, as ulcerative colitis (a disease that I write about having in this dissertation), which Ravva attributes artistically and

abstractly as being the result of generational trauma from his ancestor's mistaken killing of a cobra, which his family was tasked to care for. Ravva's text has influenced me powerfully regarding how ancestral experiences impact our bodies, and the ways that storytellers can gesture, obliquely, at this transmission without having to engage directly with scientific conversations about epigenetics.

Minal Hajratwala's *Leaving India* continues to inspire me for its depth of research and the multiple storytelling techniques that Hajratwala draws upon to tell a loving and well-researched account of her family's various diasporas from the early 1900s to the present against the backdrop of the history of the major emigration movements out of India and to Fiji, South Africa, and the Americas. Hajratwala undertook the herculean task of interviewing nearly one hundred family members, friends, and community sources and conducted a myriad of site visits internationally over a period of eight years in hopes of capturing narratives that would retain the truths of her family members' stories. While Hajratwala's work to write her book draws from her training as a journalist and is far more sophisticated than the much narrower and far less ambitious research that I conducted to write the stories of this dissertation, I remain deeply inspired by her text.

Sadia Shepard's *The Girl from Foreign* inspires me for how it discusses the experience of mixed-race people and for its calling on multiple and perhaps conflicting genealogies as a strategy for mixed-race people. Shepard's text is a complex relational autobiography that tells the story of the author's experience of growing up in a Muslim, Christian, and Jewish household in the US and her search to learn more about her beloved, deceased grandmother, a Bene Israel woman who converted to Islam when she became the third wife of her father's business partner. Shepard researches her grandmother's life through a Fulbright-supported "reverse migration" (3)

in 2001, fifteen months after her grandmother passed, to Bombay and Pune, where her grandmother lived before Partition. She also visits Pakistan, where her mother's family lives, and—after a brief trip back to the United States—returns to India on a second trip to continue her interviewing with the few members of the Bene Israel community who remain in India (22). Shepard's story navigates numerous markers of identity, including one's religions, homelands, and senses of community against the backdrop of a post-9/11 world that seeks to pigeon-hole her as Muslim and therefore dangerous. While the text ends with Shepard's declaration that she still has not decided upon one of the three religions she was raised with—she says that she remains "emotionally connected to all three" (350)—her search for her grandmother's stories and the stories of the Bene Israel community are what bring this story into focus. This central theme underscores how one's current geographic location can inform identity, and the fluid ways in which mixed-race people, diasporic people, and people raised with multiple religions, highlight particular branches of their genealogical trees as resources to gain access to community. In this sense, Shepard's story presents genealogy as a strategy more than an inherent and immovable identity marker.

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* continues to guide me in how the author addresses generational knowledge. Ondaatje's text offers key windows into the experience of the diasporic subject, including how family formations transcend the physicality of one's home spaces. For example, Ondaatje retells the story of a recurring image that he sees:

> That night, I will have not so much a dream as an image that repeats itself. I see my own straining body which stands shaped like a star and realise gradually I am part of a human pyramid. Below me are other bodies that I am standing on and above me are several more, though I am quite near the top. With cumbersome slowness we are walking from one end

> of the huge living room to the other. We are all chattering away like the crows and cranes so that it is often difficult to hear. I do catch one piece of dialogue. A Mr Hobday has asked my father if he has any Dutch antiques in the house. And he replies, "Well . . . there *is* my mother." My grandmother lower down gives a roar of anger. But at this point we are approaching the door which being twenty feet high we will be able to pass through only if the pyramid turns sideways. Without discussing it the whole family ignores the opening and walks slowly through the pale pink rose-coloured walls into the next room. (27)

In this scene, the metaphor of the generations is represented in a human pyramid that depends, literally, on the movements of the prior generations for the location of the descendants. Ondaatje himself is near the top of the pyramid, as part of the younger generations. Based on this position, one might argue that Ondaatje is lacking in control over the direction of the pyramid, though as someone higher up he has a good vantage point to see where the family is headed. While there is good-natured ribbing that takes place in this configuration, as noted in Ondaatje's father's joke, the importance of this structure is underscored by how the pyramid navigates the doorway of the family home, which we might interpret as representing the family's next threshold, an avenue to the future. Ondaatje notes that the only way to make it through these (massive) doorways is to move the pyramid sideways. However, as the descendant, he is unable to make this decision. Instead, in an elegant moment of surprise, the family acts as one unit and does not turn, but rather transcends the physical space of the family home in Ceylon by simply moving through the wall. In this instance, Ondaatje indicates to the reader that the formal structure, the *real* structure of the family, does not rely upon the physicality of home, but rather on the interrelations that make up the family pyramid, which transcends everything else and moves, in a sense, as one

body. I interpret this to mean that the cohesion of the family does not rely on place so much as the interconnectedness of descendants and ancestors, a recognition that has guided some of the central messages of this dissertation.

Maxine Hong Kingston's genre-bending *The Woman Warrior* is a powerful text that has also influenced how I have approached the storytelling in this dissertation. While I have not ended up drawing upon the mythology or the fictional imaginings that characterize Kingston's text, I spent quite a bit of time thinking about what my ancestors may have been doing when the archives—both papers and people—were unable to answer my questions. I have also been inspired by the various points of view that Kingston utilizes in *The Woman Warrior*. While the author's first-person experiences are presented as memoir, the second person is invoked as part of the Chinese mythology, as told to Kingston by her mother, and the third-person is utilized as a mixture of voices that blends the first two points of view with Kingston's American siblings. Kingston's employment of these three points of view positions the text in a vexed relationship to genre that pushes the limits of memoir that I find inspiring. I also draw inspiration from Kingston's text to understand more clearly the responsibility of telling family stories and the expectations of the forms we employ.

Theoretical Influences

Life writing and diaspora theories have shaped my thoughts about writing this dissertation in meaningful ways. Life writing provides me with a lens to engage with the ethical dimensions of what it means for me to produce this kind of narrative. Because of how the creative nonfiction stories I have written in this dissertation could easily be classified as family narratives, I have drawn inspiration from Kirin Narayan, who states that family narratives

"include rehashings of recent events that the speaker may have personally observed; oral history and legends about ancestors that are passed along through generations; and also myths that index a family's relationship to supernatural or divine beings" (240). Narayan also highlights the larger function of these narratives, which are often retold ritually at family reunions, and how they connect us to specific geographies and larger social moments when she says, "Family stories offer family members a personalized connection to places and to history" (240). I understand this connection to history through the un/recovering of Kali Nath's narrative, and how his legacy has allowed for a more personal connection not only to our family in India, but also to India's struggle for independence from colonial rule. Similarly, my maternal grandmother's story of how she met my grandfather just after departing Honolulu in late October 1941 stitches our family's sense of history to WW2 and, for me, provides an origin story for the enduring connection that I have to Hawai'i.

Similarly, I turn to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's 2010 text, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, for an understanding of immigrant narratives, another framework that I believe these family narratives fall within. Smith and Watson have characterized immigrant narratives by the ways that "formerly marginal or displaced ethnic and racialized subjects explore the terms of their cultural identities and their diasporic and transnational allegiances" (156–57). I have found it useful that life writing can become a conduit through which immigrants and descendants of immigrants position themselves to tell stories to "legitimate their membership" in the nation where they are residing (66) and to produce assimilation narratives or apologias that "set the record straight" (67) and, therefore, more accurately represent the truth of their experiences of immigration. In thinking about my freedom fighter great-grandfather, I also appreciate how Smith and Watson underscore that the utilization

of life writing can be deeply politicized in important ways, "becom[ing] a call, sometimes to revolution, to reform ethnic subjects through autobiographical acts" (157). While Kali Nath was not an immigrant, I believe the way that he grappled with identity within the British Empire informed meaningfully how his son and, in turn, my father, conceived of themselves once they immigrated to the US. In this dissertation, I have tried to position my family's movements in relation to historical contexts, including India's decolonial movement, the legacy of Partition, and WW1 and WW2.

While immigrant biography can be said not to line up with diaspora theory—in that immigrant biography prioritizes arrival whereas diaspora theory centralizes dispersal and the impact of dispersal—thinking through diaspora theory has helped me work to engage with important frameworks within this dissertation regarding the implications of the movements of my family members. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur state that diaspora "refers specifically to the movement—forced or voluntary—of people from one or more nation-states to another" (8). While the authors expand the historical use of the term *diaspora* to include voluntary movements, they are also attentive to the need to restrict the ways that the word *diaspora* is invoked in contemporary parlance. They remind the reader that "some forms of travel are tourism, and every attempt to mark movements as necessarily disenfranchising become imperialist gestures" (3). I find Braziel and Mannur's definition of diaspora useful because, in the production of this dissertation, I wanted to be mindful of the need to distinguish between tourism and diasporic movements so as to avoid vacating from *diaspora* the specific contexts of the forced and voluntary movements that Braziel and Mannur describe. Keeping this definition of diaspora and Smith and Watson's mapping of immigrant biographies and other life writing genres in mind, I have sought to produce these narratives with their "historical and cultural

specificity" intact (Braziel and Mannur 3), to be attentive to relevant immigration and emigration policies and other socio-historical information to illustrate how these narratives operate within the larger category of immigrant biography.

Furthermore, I have sought to remain vigilant to how race operates within these narratives and how, specifically, racialization operates within the contested boundaries of the United States. Considering my father's experiences of racialization, I sought to underscore how, for example, South Asians have simultaneously benefited from and fallen victim to white supremacy in the United States. In his 2000 text, *The Karma of Brown Folk* Vijay Prashad illuminates this reality by defining white supremacy as indexing "not just those who are virulent and overt racists (the militias and the Klan) but also those who are passive participants in a culture that reviles black people (if not in word, then certainly in deed)" (86). Dispelling South Asian Americans' membership in a model-minority myth, Prashad recenters conversations on the comparative success of South Asians in the US from one of essentialism to one of the highly selective reality of immigration policies that only allowed professional South Asians to immigrate to the US. Prashad's point here is simple—there is nothing inherently superior about South Asian Americans and their supposedly easy ascension to middle-class lifestyles in the US. Post-1965, and perhaps pre-1980s, when South Asian laborers who later became motel owners, taxi drivers, and domestic workers began to immigrate to the U.S. in greater numbers, only "state-selected Asians" (6), or those who had the desired qualities of what would later be ascribed to model-minority status, were given entrance to the US. Prashad argues against the essentialism that has been leveraged to pit South Asians in opposition to other minority groups, particularly black Americans, and instead points to the way that the US state has invested in producing protocols that continue to divide communities of color (81). In this dissertation, I have

sought to remain vigilant to how I am engaging discussions of racial privilege and oppression within the US, particularly as I navigated how to talk about my father's perceived successes in the US.

Considering that the last third of this dissertation was founded on the two-month research project I undertook in summer 2014, I also drew inspiration from how Vijay Mishra discusses "re-migrations" (3), which are characterized by feelings of alienation that arise through being tourists in the purported homeland, a sentiment that I experienced and has been reflected in the writing that I produced about my experiences of uncovering ancestors in India. In a more abstract sense, this feeling echoed the feelings of alienation that arose from visiting the past through paper archives and oral histories that resituated, for example, my ancestors, what I have thought I have known of them, and how they may have seen the world. Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to be mindful of how these experiences produce interesting narratives about who can go home—and the ways in which diasporics are perceived as outsiders even within these homelands.

Some Conclusions

The process of writing this dissertation has pushed me into spaces of self-reflection and memory that I wasn't expecting to enter, even within the deeply personal genre of creative nonfiction. A nagging question that has popped up for me and again and again has been who, if anyone, will these stories speak to other than my family, other than people who know us or know me? Isn't the worst critique that one can launch at creative nonfiction texts (and writers) that the genre is self-absorbed, that it only gazes at its own navel, that it assumes that pictures of its own

mundane lunches are spectacular enough to shove in the faces of people across the world? Creative nonfiction is the telling of stories by self-absorbed people, isn't it?

I have struggled to answer these questions, and I feel indebted to Kim Barnes for helping me find another way to talk about what I hope to do with texts like this dissertation. In her contribution to the anthology *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre*, Barnes states, "Readers of nonfiction should come away knowing more about themselves than they do about *you*" (133, emphasis in original). I wasn't sure what to make of this claim at first. How do readers learn about themselves by reading about someone else?

I came to see, however, that writing creative nonfiction is to hone important writerly tools: self-reflection, meaning-making, attempts at understanding ourselves in relation to the worlds around us. Creative nonfiction stories are exercises with these tools. For me, those tools have included pushing past self-doubt and perceived barriers to knowledge and connection, observing and augmenting memories, showing up to sometimes painful sites of memory, showing up for moments of celebration, listening to family members closely, reaching out for what we don't have, and doing the work we must to find connection beyond what we have been given.

In turn, to read creative nonfiction texts is to observe the author's tools in practice. The appeal of reading this genre, to me, is the implied invitation to experiment with the author's tools. The text is a demonstration of the practice the reader is invited to participate in and adapt to their own needs. The text isn't about the self-absorption of the writer; it's an invitation for the reader to take up the author's same tools to learn more about themselves. And this, perhaps, is how stories of a mixed South Asian American girl may appeal to a broader audience of people who know nothing about her other than what they encounter on these pages.

*

I am grateful to my committee for shepherding me throughout this process and for supporting me as I produced this dissertation, keeping an eye not just on my completion of this doctoral degree but also the larger goal of publishing this collection as a book.

I hope you, dear reader, enjoy it.

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I. Telling Stories on You

Where the Water Is

In the dark water, daughters don't swim straight. Grandmother, mother, daughter, back to grandmother again. Fins splash, curl water, wake waves. In the dark water, daughters don't swim straight. Such stubborn fish. Pull forward. Arch back. In the dark water, daughters swim spirals to hold our past, to guide us, the water, forward again.

*

Grandma is our only "grandma," because we call my other grandma thakurma, which is father's mother in Bengali. Even though Grandpa called Grandma "Großmutter," we never did. Maybe that was because his parents were from Germany, while ours are from San Diego, USA, and Khulna, India.

Maybe ancestral languages spoil after one generational step, when the second generation has both feet planted on foreign soil.

The tragedy of week-old curry or a crusty lemon meringue pie lost in the back of a moldering American fridge.

Come over here.

Maybe those languages skip over murky descendants like stones over water. Maybe we're the water, waiting for those cold tongues to touch us, hoping this time that we'll get something warmer than English.

I want to tell you a story.

Grandma met Grandpa because of a duck! Did you know that?

It was a Sunday. There I was, driving with the blooming duck in my lap.

She picked him up off the side of the road!

. . . It was moments like this when I feel the hand of God in my life.

Grandma never complained. That's because she lived through the Depression. That's like a really, really long time ago. I wonder if she was really, really sad.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I don't know how to tell a story!

What is this story if not the tinny recording of Grandma's voice stuttering on your tape recorder? The voice of your sisters, your mother, disagreeing with you about the details? The telling and the retelling, the un-telling and the telling again?

Fragments of words and phrases torn up over time in addled memory, knocking about like loose change in a forgotten coin purse.

It'll come to me a little bit later.

A story when, in the end, she couldn't remember his name anymore.

Remember that nice man? He was such a nice man.

Maybe Grandma told you this story so you'd look for more than a man who could read your body like a sentence. Maybe she wanted you to have more words than that. Maybe Grandma wanted you literate.

*

It's December 2002. I'm home from college for winter break. I'm with a guy who's not *the* guy (my dad's uninvited assessment), though I'll stay with the guy for another six months.

I'm itchy at home, am checking my Nokia constantly, grabbing at calls from my boyfriend like he's air and home is a dead-water wade pool.

We make the 2.5-hour drive from Pasadena to Escondido for an afternoon dinner at Grandma and Grandpa's. Mom's not with us. It's starting to occur to me how strange it is that it's Dad who makes these trips to see Mom's parents. Maybe he does it because his parents have

passed already. Maybe he does it because even after the divorce, he still calls our mom's parents Mom and Dad.

Maya, two years older than me, is home from college in Atlanta. Joya, eight years older than me, more mom than sister, is chasing her boys, Rab and Momo, across Grandma and Grandpa's living room, negotiating Grandma's collection of brittle seashells out of little boy fingers. Her soon-to-be-husband Ben is here too. He's been in love with her since high school, but it wasn't until he lived in Costa Rica and had the eagle dreams—the ones with the eagle that took him adventuring that ended each time with, yes, Joya—that he flew home, rode his bike the ten miles from his childhood home to ours, and told Joya, finally, how he felt. I was babysitting while Joya was figure-modeling at Art Center. Toddler Rab reached the sliding glass door at the kitchen before I did and pulled the bushy-bearded mountain man in across the threshold into our home. This is the story we tell and retell about how Ben came back into our lives, how Rab chose him.

The boys are tumbling over each other on Grandma and Grandpa's plush wall-to-wall carpet. My sisters and I still wrestle here too despite our basically-full-grown-ness. Everybody so up, happy. There's a promise here, but one it's not safe to trust yet.

Chairs pushed back from the kitchen's linoleum floors. I'm clearing plates. When Grandma starts clearing with me, I pretend not to see Grandpa's hand graze Grandma's bum. She smiles, swats at him half-heartedly. Grandpa's orange potassium pill fizzes a water glass. Grandpa looks hollowed, his collarbone too loud, his voice a lowercase O, cancer cutting at him, the sharp sparks pulling him back.

I move to join the rest of the family in the living room, where as kids my sisters and I would gum up with sweaty palms the full-wall picture window that looked out on lazy cars

slowing at the four-way stop of South Beech Street and East Fourth Avenue. We would watch the afternoon pass by like anything in a frame was more interesting than real life.

That was before any of us escaped to school, before Mom cheated on Dad with Joya's two best friends' dads. That was before Joya started to wile out and Dad and Mom sent her 3,500 miles away to Dad's friend Carla and her mother, a woman we were told to call Doña Raquel, who lived in Costa Rica—"like they didn't think there were guys there too" was the joke. That was before Joya at sixteen started dating the 27-year-old long boarder who lived in Huntington Beach, two hours from our house who she later was engaged to for a while, who Mom and Dad liked and let her sleep over with on the weekends because he was so much better than the boys at her public high school she'd been hanging out with before they sent her away. That was before she came home glowing and twenty-one, telling us she was pregnant and had planned it. That was before I decided sappy love and relationships were for suckers, and virginity was a thing to get over as quickly as possible. That was before I became the go-to person for classmates who needed Planned Parenthood trips for STI screenings, morning-after pills.

That time, staring out the picture window, was also both before and after Mom had moved out to be with the man Dad later hired to tile our pool, and then the rocket scientist who hired her to build a solid padauk mantle with music-grade ebony inlay and later became our step dad. That was before Dad started getting engaged, first to a twig of a woman with huge fake boobs, and then a woman a couple years older than Joya who fed him marbled cheesecake and mimosas for breakfast, when I-the-parent had to tell him that if he was drunk like that all the time, *at the back of your head all the time, lost*, I said, shaking my fingers at the crown of my head, *you won't be able to come back again* and he'd been quiet and nodded and said I was right when the tears were streaming down my face.

That window-longing was before all that.

Grandma stops me under the arched doorway that leads to the basement. A mounted plastic fish that one of Grandpa's fishing buddies gave him a few Christmases back is stuck on the wall. It used to sing, but doesn't anymore. Grandpa heads out to the living room.

I want to tell you something, she says. Eyes magnified behind thick glasses, her paper fingertip skin cold on my forearm. I look for my sisters. She pats my arm. We sit back down at the kitchen table. I hope it's not another *Daily Bread* she wants me to look at. Even in my agnosticism, I feel bad for hoping this, but I hope anyway.

Joya is loud-laughing in the living room.

Something about a duck. Easter. The 40s.

What?

I watch Grandma closely but don't hear much. I hold my ribcage, keep my gill flaps closed, not wanting to offend her because she's my grandmother, and I love her, even though I feel in my bones that we are such different creatures. Our sweet, white, well-meaning grandma who probably saved herself for marriage, who's loved a Christian god her whole life, doesn't even curse, and her heathen, brown, sometimes-slutty granddaughters getting drunk or stoned in corners so tight no one could fuck with us.

I try to listen to her across a wide gash of water.

Blah blah, something about World War II blah-blah, about Uncle Gordon in Florida for the Air Force blah-blah, and Grandma went to Hawai'i—

Momo is howling in the living room. *What about Hawai'i, Grandma?*

Grandma went to Hawai'i because her big sister from nursing school, the one who was a year ahead of her and assigned to help guide her through the program, *what was her name? It'll*

come to me a little bit later. That's right Virginia Mast! Anyway, Virginia had moved there because there were plenty of jobs and dates (dates!) *too if you wanted them.*

Grandpa's big old laugh is bouncing off the picture-window.

Grandma left San Francisco on the SS Lurline, the same boat Grandpa would take a few years later when he was shipped out, *but I'm getting ahead of myself*, she says, laughing.

Hawai'i was wonderful. Parties on the beach, so many friends, learning about aloha, nice folks who took good care of her, each other, the land.

The pali had wind so strong it turned a well-dressed woman inside out!

The pulley?

Upside-down waterfalls—

—on something called the windward side? Something about watersheds—

—in mountain cavities.

Something about dating—

—military men.

(Grandma!)

Something about a family called the Kempers who Grandma stayed with. Folks who took care of her. How she worked at a hospital called Tripler in the maternity ward for army wives.

The husbands were never around.

Grandma's high-pitched voice sprinkling water on dusty scales.

The head nurse said that as long as they were there to lay the keel, we'd take care of the rest!

I don't get the ship reference, but I laugh anyway.

Something about the paper. About folks coming and going, how you'd have to have your named published before you left port. Something about debt collectors and keeping people honest.

I want to go wrestle with my sisters.

I check my phone under the kitchen table. No messages.

Uncle Gordon with a one-month leave so he was coming home to San Diego. Uncle Gordon, Grandma's favorite brother. She'd only been in Hawai'i six months, but she took the Lurline back home at the end of November 1941 because she wanted to see him. It'd been so long! She docked back in California and heard that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. Honolulu on fire when Grandma had just been rocking on a boat, lurching toward home.

All those friends back in Honolulu to worry about. Uncle Gordon called back to his post.

Gordon asked Grandma to take care of his brand new car, and Grandma obliged, and Grandma suddenly in the Navy.

What I want to tell you about is in March, though, but I don't know how to tell a story.

I pat Grandma's paper hand, feel myself settling back down.

One of the other nurses in Grandma's bunk in Balboa where she was stationed got a duck somehow. Cute for a while but not for long.

It was pooping everywhere. *I told them about my mom's orchard, said I could take it there.*

All her bunkmates so relieved. Grandma heading back to Escondido from Balboa.

The blooming duck in my lap, all over that car. You know, I listened to the radio. They told us to pick up any army men we saw, take them home for a meal since they were so far from their families.

(Sure. For a *meal*.)

I was used to picking up a bunch of guys

(Grandma! [The desire to read into *everything*]).

You know, to take from the base to the local bar, but there wasn't anyone this Sunday except two guys. I pulled over. Hold this duck, I said. That was the first thing I said to them! I handed that blooming duck to the guy who sat up front in the cab with me.

Grandpa? I ask. I'm feeling the water, finally.

She smiles, looks at the plastic fish, mounted on the wall. *I asked them where they'd like to go, if they had a bar in mind, and this young fella who I'd given the duck to said, well, I don't drink. He said they were just a couple of guys from New York. That they'd arrived recently and didn't know what there was to do out here. Well, I remembered how nice all those folks had been to me when I was out in Hawai'i and I asked them had they ever picked an orange. When they said no, I took them to my mother's house.*

Rab is calling for me from the living room. Momo is crying. Grandpa is scolding someone, Momo most likely.

I am leaning forward, holding Grandma's hand. I want this water to swallow me whole.

Grandma stands, gives the kitchen faucet a good twist shut. I hadn't noticed it dripping. She crosses the linoleum back over to me. *This is when I feel the hand of God in my life. You see?* she says. *The smallest decisions, they can change the rest of your life.*

That was the end of our first storytelling session. I was 19.

*

Grandma met Grandpa because of a duck! Did you know that? I'm talking to my sisters in our dad's kitchen in Pasadena. Maya is scrounging in the fridge. Joya is sipping at a fat glass of hot tea.

Yah, Joya says, smiling warmly. *It's a good story*.

Momo toddles into the room, looking puffy faced and ready for bed. She scoops him up and he pulls on her shirt, asking for a mimi. The two of them head to the back bedroom, the room that has been Joya's since she was a teenager. *It's good to have you home, Anj*, Joya calls over her shoulder.

Ben is reading a story to Rab in my old room.

Maya is making a plate.

Can you believe she picked him up on the side of the road? I say.

Maya shrugs. *Propaganda. They coulda gotten people to do anything they wanted at that time*. She drops into a chair next to me. Maya, the serious one. The one who would become a lawyer.

I was thinking about writing the story for her, I say a little tentatively.

That would be really nice, Anj. She takes a big bite of the cauliflower, potato, and pea dish that is our favorite.

*

What happens if, in the course of writing a story about her, you turn your grandmother into a fish? And what if you turn the duck that brought her to your grandfather into a warm-bellied ship?

If grandma is a fish, and grandpa is his aluminum skiff, I am the knife blade separating scale from skin. I am a drag of red jellied belly bits across the cement pathway outside their

house, where crystals hang from hooks suctioned on the kitchen window with fishing lines, sprinkling rainbows in yellow afternoon light across warm walls, like candles dancing in the dark. I'm the cold cavity, borne within.

I'm looking for where the water is.

*

Grandma kept the story going when we spoke on the telephone for birthdays or holidays, in her cramped cursive in her birthday cards that she sent across the country from Escondido to New York to me.

> *Happy birthday, Anjoli!*
> *Know that your Grandfather and I*
> *pray for you every day.*
> *We love you very much.*
> *Love, Grandma*
> *P.S. Remember, you're at that age!*

Grandma watering me with this story again until the words were heavy and full inside me, until it was all around and through me, until my fins cut water like deserts never existed, like love was always there.

She gave me these words so many times, she started drying up herself.

When Grandpa died. When Alzheimer's started its cruel bleaching of bones.

*

How long was Grandma in Hawai'i again, Momma?

Momma. I call Mom this when my heart is full and I know she can hold it. It's what I've called her since we were little, when we all lived in the same house. Calling her Momma feels like putting my head in her lap and knowing her busy hands will stop whatever they'd been doing and pet my hair, not unlike one of our beloved neighborhood cats that came and went as

they pleased, whose appearances were all the more special when they weren't trapped inside, because they wanted to be with us.

A long pause. Her wireless crackles. An ambulance races in the street below my living room window followed by the NYPD. *Two years, I think, sweetheart.*

But she wasn't in Honolulu during Pearl Harbor, right? I thought she got there in '41?

Well, she certainly left before the bombing. That was why Uncle Gordon was called to post and she got to have his car. Listen, you'll have to ask her again, sweetheart. When you're home, though. Her hearing is going the way of her memory, I'm afraid.

*

I knew that if I didn't accept the story, make room for it in my heart and mind as truth and acknowledge it as such, it would be lost for good.

I angled for details like I wasn't desperate for them. Like I wouldn't be lost without them. Like I could live without them. Like I didn't need water to breathe.

*

Years later, in fall 2008, after I'd started graduate school in Hawai'i, I felt an urgency about recording Grandma's story. Her Alzheimer's was progressing, and I worried that it might be lost for good. I used a tape recorder this time, and I'd asked her ahead of time if she'd be willing to tell me the story again. I felt like I was putting cheap buckets all over the house, capturing what I could before the roof gave way.

Grandma came up to Pasadena with our aunt, Ginger. The two of them had brought Grandma's Hawai'i photo albums to help ground Grandma's memories. We set up shop on Dad's dining room table.

You see, in my day, photographs didn't really last the way they do today. So, I never bothered to buy a camera. My friends sent me all of these.

The pictures were black and white, mounted on thick black paper. Grandma's fingers ran over them.

Grandma, why was it a big deal that you dated Grandpa again?

Well, to begin with, he was a Catholic.

I nodded enthusiastically, understanding that that was a big no-no then for her. She was Protestant. I jotted in the margins of my notebook that maybe it would have been like interracial marriage back then. *And then he was also a corporal. I was an ensign, an officer, that is. So that just wasn't done either. Even to run around in the park wouldn't have been acceptable*, she said. *If I was in my uniform, anyway.*

In thinking about this story, I liked that Grandma outranked him. It gave her muscles under her navy coat.

So, they were friends. And it wasn't until Grandpa took his one-month leave back to New York that she realized how much she missed him.

He'd asked her before he left what he could bring her back. *Hose*, she said. *I wanted black nylon hose.*

A racy gift to ask from a friend, wasn't it, Grandma? I was ribbing her.

She patted my hand. Silly granddaughter. *Bob wouldn't take any money from me, and I felt bad about that. They weren't cheap. He was gone for a whole month.* I nodded along, remembering this bit of the story and how it would connect to the next about what she did when he was back in California.

Grandma trailed off. *I dated some real jerks when he was gone*, she said.

I thought I heard her wrong when she said this. If I didn't have her saying it on tape, I probably wouldn't believe she did. Not only did this crack the happily-ever-after image of Grandma and Grandpa, post-duck—here was Grandma dating other guys—but Grandma never complained or called anybody a jerk. Ever. What had these dudes done to my grandma?

*

I'm a freshman in high school and am coming home from a high school party. I am climbing the dank driveway up to my father's house, where my friend has dropped me off. The moon is dancing in the oak tree branches and the playhouse looms darkly in front of the bamboo forest. The manmade wade pool that sits a few steps from the playhouse's front door is filled with leaves.

When the family was still together, that was where Mom would hose me off when I came home too muddy for the clean inside of the house. Eventually, she filled the shallow pool with water from a nearby hose and dumped in a clutch of goldfish that the raccoons clawed out as easy as salad from a buffet tray. We drained the pool then, when the mosquitoes started taking over, when Mom moved out, when Dad started getting engaged, when my sisters went away to college, but I never stopped getting bitten.

As I near the house, I fight the urge to run inside and slam the sliding-glass door shut behind me. There are wolves in the bushes, bodies ready to grab me into the shadows, all kinds of menacing, fast-running things that I hadn't actually encountered in real life.

I am singing "Jesus Loves Me" to myself quietly, even though I'm not Christian, because that's what Grandma told me to do ever since I was small when I was scared, and I still believe it helps.

When I collapse into my bed, I drop like a stone into the shallow clutches of sleep, my heart still racing. I am tired from drinking the better part of a forty and fending off my boyfriend, who is determined to take my virginity, which I refuse to give him. I am swimming through something I learned in bio that day: about how girls are born with all of the eggs they'll ever have in their lives. That this was completely unlike boys, who make and dispense of sperm from puberty onward. I scribbled something in the margins of my spiral notebook about how crazy that is, that we are like nested dolls, that to carry a girl baby is to carry all your potential grandchildren too. Maybe that makes granddaughters a grandmother's route home. And vice versa.

A matrilineal spiral. A healing. A backstitching.

That night, I have a nightmare about a monster that moves a screaming baby across the house while everyone in the house is sleeping. In the morning, we find picture books in the mailbox that prove the monster was real.

I learn that love is a barbed-wire necklace.

*

The tape recorder crackled and Grandma was talking about when Grandpa's one-month leave was finished and he came back to California. She didn't confess her feelings to him right away. There was that Catholicism to contend with, for one. So Grandma started talking to Grandpa about God.

Do you know where you're going when you die? I asked him. Now it was wartime. This is something a marine was thinking about a lot, and your grandpa was a marine. When he told me no, I told him I did, and that got him listening.

Grandma agreed to go to Grandpa's church with him since she wanted him in hers. (She was the daughter of a mission builder; she knew how conversion worked.) She met with his priest and went head to head on Bible verses.

I wanted to marry your grandfather, she said, explaining what she may have been concerned sounded like pushiness. *I think you should know what I'm talking about*.

She laughed at that and I laughed too, though I felt something pinch in my chest. I was dating a man I'd been with for several years who I liked to think about marrying. We wouldn't split until almost a decade had passed. I wondered if I would have to find a religion to be in a relationship that would last. My partner at the time was religious. I was not. I knew I couldn't ask Grandma this.

The flock of Joya's now-three boys whirred past where Grandma and I were hovering next to the dining room table at my father's house. The usually smooth surface of water ribbonned, tore. Was that me or the water?

Grandpa got to see then that Grandma knew her stuff and, surprisingly, his priest didn't. Also, Grandpa liked her picture of a forgiving God rather than the fire and brimstone one he'd been raised with. He converted, and they started dating officially. They spent all their free time together. The war waged somewhere in the periphery and the two worried silently about when Grandpa would be shipped out.

Have you checked the board? one of the nurses in Grandma's bunk asked her one morning.

I told her no.

Well, your name's on it!

The inevitable hadn't happened, the impossible had. They'd been so busy worrying about when Grandpa would be shipped out, they'd forgotten that of course Grandma could be shipped out too. Grandma called Grandpa for the first time ever—*you just didn't do that*—and Grandpa went AWOL from his post, *something he just didn't do either*.

I told him the only way I wouldn't get shipped out was if I was engaged. She'd laugh at this, blushing at her forwardness more than a half-century later. *I still feel bad about that too*. What was worse, she'd said, was that since he'd just spent all this money on her hose, she'd been the one to put up the money for her engagement ring.

The Navy released me when I told them I was engaged. They didn't take married women. The head nurse asked me who I was engaged to. When I told her a marine, she said it'd never last. Phooey! We sure showed her! Grandma laughed at that too, and I couldn't keep my arms from wrapping around her. She never muscled like that. This was my favorite part of the story.

They were married a year, living in a bare beach cottage by a stream that one day flooded its banks and their kitchen. That's when Grandma learned that Grandpa could build things, and what a talented fisherman he was. He was a freediver who, in one breath, would touch down to the ocean floor with a chisel and hammer and knock abalone off their rocks before they could suction back down. When he had them loose, he'd stick them on his swim trunks and swim back to the surface. Walking out of the water, he must've looked like a beautiful (I've seen the pictures) mollusk-ed sea monster.

Grandma would pound, batter, and fry the abalone. Grandpa inlaid the shells into a coffee table that we'd play Kings in the Corners on, that Grandma would play solitaire on long after Grandpa died.

On the day of Grandpa's funeral, when my sisters and aunt and parents and I took turns weeping in Grandma's kitchen, Grandma told me the rest of the story.

One day your grandpa came home and said tomorrow's the day. He was getting shipped out. So, anyway—that was the phrase my Grandma-who-never-complained would use when something too hard was happening that she didn't want to dwell on—*when they finally boarded their trucks and Bob said goodbye, I watched the truck where he was and when they got out on the road, I went out and I kept going up until I got behind his truck and he was sitting outside looking back so I drove all the way down to the entrance of the ship, from Miramar down to the base. When we finally got to the base, they turned in and I couldn't go. That was the end, so I had to keep going straight ahead. That was the worst day of my life. So, wooooooo!* she mimed crying hard here. *I cried and cried! It wasn't fair—we were just getting started! Here the Lord had given the man He'd made just for me, and he was getting taken from me! That's why now,* she'd said, water flowing down my face, filling me, *I can't cry. Not like I did that day. I cried my tears for your grandpa that day. The Lord gave me more than fifty years with that man after that, and I'm grateful. He gave me a man He'd made just for me. And I got to love him and have my life with him all these years. And, anyway, in a little bit of time, I'll get to be with him again!*

A few years later, she was.

*

Can a story hold us together?

Grandma wanted it to. To give us a story that we needed when parents split and little girls were in danger. To nurse us through the heartbreaks and worse that we would endure. Grandma wanted to give us everything, even if that meant she had nothing left.

It was her favorite story to tell. It was her last story, the one that brought her back to the present.

You're at that age now, she'd start, hoping that was enough to weave the story back into us, even after it had been lost to her, that promise that there was a way forward, that the dark water would hold us together.

Grandma had been waiting for my sisters and me to be 19 our whole lives, so she could tell us this story. One on one, one at a time.

I keep thinking about what a long time to wait that was.

What Babas Are For

It would be the farthest I'd been from home. Minutes before I boarded the eighteen-hour flight, I reminded myself that I'd been away at college for two years already, that I'd be gone for only seven weeks of the summer, that I had traveled alone before, that I was brave.

"You'll have to get some sleep on the flight," Dad said over our last meal together before I officially left the country.

Across the sticky table, amid the clamor of the food court, I saw the worry wrinkle the skin around his eyes.

*

I'd woken up that morning in Pasadena feeling forgotten. My bags were in my mother's car, and as I'd looked back at our house, I'd wondered why—when he'd left for his own early flight the week prior—Dad hadn't woken me up with his customary scruffy-bearded peck on my forehead to say goodbye. I'd peered at his room upstairs, watching the ceiling fan cut the dim morning light with each turn of its dark blades. He was nowhere.

He was gone a lot when my older sisters and I were small, but he would also take us out of school to go with him on his business trips whenever he could. Pharmaceutical companies that wanted him to endorse their drugs would send him a first-class ticket that he'd exchange for a few coach seats. He was a surgeon—a "women's physician," he said to say if anyone asked—and he taught at a university near our southern California home.

Amid his traveling, being on call, teaching classes, and attending board meetings, we were only home together for occasional weeklong stints. After Mom moved out, our parents

shared custody. By the time Joya was in college, Maya and I had decided to stay at Dad's full time.

Dad's home is our home, I remember reasoning. *Mom decided to leave. She can come visit if she wants to see us.*

Even when their divorce was fresh and Mom's absence was like dark matter, invisible but impacting our gravity, I loved going on those business trips. I remember playing hide-and-seek with the other doctors' kids in convention centers and monstrous resorts in Kā'anapali, Miami, Palm Springs, Sydney. We spent entire weeks in bright, sparkling pools, each indistinguishable from the one before. In the evenings, we threw t-shirts over our burned shoulders and played elevator tag until one of the lifts broke. We hid in the rooms, ordered room service. We poured ketchup and mustard across a pile of half-eaten pancakes, or drizzled maple syrup on a half-eaten hamburger that we coated with artificial sweetener. We mixed orange juice and milk in a glass with lots of salt and pepper, garnished the drink with a sprig of fresh parsley for visual interest, and watched the mess curdle. Then, we dared each other to eat—take a bite, swallow a swig—before pushing the mess out the door for someone else to clean. We sucked on sugar packets, jumped on the beds, then did it all again the next day. We were little nightmares. When we were bored, we asked Dad if we could come to his dinner talks. I'd put on one of the flower-print dresses Mom had sewn for my older sisters that I was then big enough to wear. We slicked back our hair, bleached from chlorine and the sun, into tight ponytails. We sat quietly in the back of a packed hall with napkins on our laps, giggling behind tall glasses of ice water.

All the while, Dad ran around, attending or delivering lectures. Five-feet, six-inches tall, he looked tidy in his tailored suits, his chest perpetually puffed out, his chin tilted slightly up, like a person accustomed to speaking with giants. His large ears protruded from the sides of his

head, and his smooth brown face broke into easy smiles, revealing slightly crooked teeth. A plastic nametag was permanently clipped to his breast pocket. His eyes were mischievous; I never really knew what he was up to.

He was a good speaker. I knew that then, not just because of how often he was invited away, but because it seemed there was a perpetual crowd of groupies hovering near our table, fawning over my sisters and me and saying, just loudly enough for us to hear, that "Dr. Roy was *such* a good speaker," before someone shushed them (loudly), saying that his daughters were *right there*, and they should keep their voices down. We rolled our eyes at each other—those suck-ups—then smile into our napkins. We marveled at how the man who couldn't finish a sentence at home—whose limp attempt at communicating was more often than not, "Give me the-uh-the . . ."—could conjure up thirteen-letter scientific terms without faltering.

Our dad was the most important person in the world. Other people's adoration of him only confirmed this.

It wasn't until we became invested in the complex customs of pre-adolescent social hierarchies, wanted to be more like the pack, were more keen on staying in one place than tagging along on our dad's trips, that we lost interest in having our father's singularity recognized.

Once, when I was in the fourth grade, I was having a sleepover and Dad was home during an unusually long stint in town. He was on the phone with an intern, and we were all eating the dinner Dad had just finished cooking: chicken curry, a veggie dish, dahl—Indian food, the vestigial organ of an explicit assimilationist project launched long before us. Dad wasn't on call, but the attending physician at the hospital was overbooked, and the shaky voice that we could

hear through the phone was doing what even I recognized was a hysterectomy without supervision perhaps for the first time.

"No! No!" Dad was saying, sucking the dahl from the tips of his fingers. "Yes, that's the bladder, just move that to the side!"

Darcy, a friend from school, froze beside me. I looked over to see her pale face gone even whiter. Before this phone call, she had been staring at the plate of food before her, presumably trying to figure out how to eat without silverware, which I'd mistakenly thought was going to be the biggest challenge of this sleepover. I got up from the table and brought her a fork from the kitchen.

Because we were getting older and it was harder to miss school, we spent more time at home. Every few days, it seemed, we'd wake up to our dad's illegible doctor's scrawl scribbled across a strip of paper. In close, he'd remind us to "wow 'em." That was his motto. "Make them say, 'Wow!'" he'd say on those few times he did drop us off at school. I remember curling away from his enthusiasm like I didn't want to feel his words. If I let myself feel his love then, I'd miss him that much more when he was away. I was tired of missing him. On those handwritten notes, next to where he signed "Baba," he'd draw a hurried smiley face sandwiched between two sticky-outie ears, almost as big as his real ones. I collected dozens of these notes in a folder somewhere.

In 1995, during the summer between sixth and seventh grades, he was away for two full months. He was going to Saudi Arabia and our contact with him would be limited, he'd told us across the dining-room table. Though Joya was away at college in San Diego by then, both she and Maya had objected, said they'd miss him too much, and I joined the choir too, a bit. I was

twelve and mad at him for going away again. *Doesn't he want to be with us?* I wondered. I told myself I didn't care that he was gone and half-believed it.

I didn't know it then, but he'd been invited to teach in Saudi Arabia. As the story goes, a member of the royal family had gotten sick and found the quality of care to be subpar in the local hospitals. One of the princes, an ambassador to the United States, mentioned while golfing with an American that the royal family was interested in flying in US faculty to Riyadh to get the hospitals "up to snuff." They were willing to pay $1,000 per day to qualified doctors (this, in the mid-90s). With Joya in college, Maya and me in private schools, and Mom on alimony, Dad jumped at the offer.

In later years, he told me about the locked walled compound where he stayed with the twenty-five or so other American physicians.

"The apartments were very nice," he said. "Just like in the US."

When I pressed him for details, he recounted Orientalist details he thought would interest me: the calls for prayer, the heads and hands that were rumored to roll in a square nearby to deter crime. He told me stories of a Westerner adventuring in an exotic Middle East. I searched these words for clues that might tell me how much he missed us.

When he returned that summer, Dad brought back mirrored jewelry boxes and 22-carat gold necklaces he'd had made with our names in Arabic along with some joke t-shirts he'd secured. One had three cartoon women standing on different-sized platforms, with only their eyes showing. Below them were the words, "Saudi Arabian beauty contest." I didn't get it, but at his welcome-home party, everyone had a good laugh. I locked myself in my room and listened to them toasting with their wine glasses, wondering when he was going to leave again. I wondered when, if ever, I was going to get my turn with him.

Soon after that, Joya's psychology-major friend, Adina, came over to the house and looked around in wonder. "It's amazing!" she said as she burst out laughing. Her arms stretched open to take in the space of our living room, cluttered with dusty knickknacks from around the world. "Everything you have in your whole life is because of vaginas! Everywhere you look, everything you have, vaginas!"

We laughed too, but wondered about the cost of these things. We knew what we had to give up in return.

*

Now, I was on my way to South Africa for a summer program, and Dad wasn't there. He hadn't come home in time to say goodbye to me, as his East Coast conference had kept him longer than expected. Though I'd be back in seven weeks, I'd only have a handful of days with the family before heading back to New York to start my junior year.

When he called to say goodbye, Joya answered the phone. Eight months pregnant, she stood with one hand resting on her quickly growing belly and held out the phone to me with the other, pleading with her eyes. I dodged the receiver and closed my bedroom door behind me, nursing my hurt. Still, while my hands were busy folding clothes into a bloated suitcase, my ear angled to the door as I heard Joya tell him about how our middle sister, Maya, was settled in at her internship in Washington, DC; that, yes, I was old enough to travel halfway across the world. I was smart enough to handle the post-apartheid climate. I could do it on my own. I puffed up my chest a little at Joya's faith in me.

Our home, now wrapped in gauzy morning light, looked distinctly empty. Joya hugged me tight, and her husband and my two little nephews, Rab and Momo, gave me squeezes before

backing off to let me dip into Mom's car. I held onto Joya's belly, stared back at the house, didn't make a move toward the car door.

"Come on, darlin'," Mom said gently, standing beside her Prius. She was wearing a loose-fitting gray sweatshirt and pants—the kind that cinch at the ankles. Small red fingerlings broke up the whites of her brown eyes. Her hair, usually an even poof around her handsome face, was still smashed on one side from the pillow she'd evidently jumped up from at her house in Altadena just a few minutes away. She waved at me dramatically to hurry up. "Don't want you to miss your plane."

On the way to the airport, I stole glimpses of Mom's death grip on the wheel, her knuckles paper white. She wove in and out of morning traffic. I wondered if she'd always been like this—quiet, impassive—during all those years of driving Dad to the airport when they were still a couple and she didn't want to go along. I almost reached over to loosen her fingers from the wheel a bit to help her relax, to touch her heavily creamed skin, which was beginning to blush with sun spots.

Instead, I poked at the wooden knitting needles that I'd brought along to keep my hands busy during the flight. Their knobby ends protruded from my bloated purse, which I hugged on my lap. I touched my passport for the hundredth time.

As we passed through downtown Los Angeles, I looked out the car window at the onslaught of houses and concrete that carpeted the city. I wondered what this trip would be like. A part of me wondered if I was heading out into the world, this time in the name of education, to repent for those years of mindless travel when we were kids. I touched the necklace of my name that Dad had given me and felt a surge of strength.

I said goodbye to Mom at LAX. She gave me a squeeze, said to call her right when I got in, then turned and walked back to her car, double-parked at the curb, with an efficiency that comes from years of practice at being left behind. I bit my cheek, wondering if we weren't all just punishing each other for those years of leavings; maybe that was why we kept leaving one another, again and again. I dragged my suitcases, heavily, from the curb.

At my layover in Atlanta, I scurried around the airport with my carry-ons. My phone rang from somewhere deep in my bag. I hesitated, just for a moment, then picked up.

"Well hello, Anjoli dearest."

"Hey, Dad." I refolded the map of Cape Town I'd been fiddling with moments before and clasped my hands in my lap, waiting for his words. I took a breath, tried not to sound too excited to hear from him.

"So, where are you?"

"I'm in Atlanta. I have a *two-and-a-half*-hour layover," I complained. I shredded the edges of the map and balled up the torn paper like flint hungry for a fire. A cigarette ad with a trim of colorful plastic lighters glinted at me from the souvenir shop across the hallway. I wanted to tell him that I was hurt he didn't say goodbye, that he didn't seem to care that I'd just gotten back from my second year of college and was heading out again for most of the summer, that I was sad to leave when Joya was due so soon, that I was scared to go and wasn't sure I knew what I was doing, running all the way to the other side of the world. But I didn't say anything. He'd have to hang up any second.

"Yes, but where are you in the airport?" he asked.

"I'm sitting in the food court by some greasy fast-food noodle spot." I huffed, picked at my jeans, rested my chin on my free hand.

"Anjoli, since you left for school in New York, I've been thinking. You and I haven't spent more than just a few minutes together, just the two of us, have we?"

I held my breath, leaned back into my seat. "Yeah. That's kind of true."

"Do you have a few minutes to talk to me?"

"Sure," I said, glancing at the face of my phone. "My battery's charged."

"Good. Look up."

Striding over to me with a bright white rose under his broad smile, he was neat in a black tailored business suit and a compact carry-on that he rolled casually behind him. His crisp, sky-blue shirt set off the earthen color of his skin. Even with his slight frame, he towered over the travelers hustling around him.

"But, Dad, how—?" I stammered, still speaking into the phone, my eyes welling up.

"Do you really think I'd let my youngest daughter go so far away without saying a proper goodbye?" He smiled, ended the call, and sat down across from me.

"Um, no? I mean, I was hoping not," I said. I leaned over the gray Formica table and gave him an awkward hug. He held onto me, and the familiar stubble on his face grazed my cheek. "But I didn't think you'd coordinate our layovers either. Wow, Dad."

He winked at me, shrugged. "It's the least I could do. Besides," he said, leaning back into his seat with a pleased smile, "what are babas for?"

II. The Body's Question

Bald Woman

I might be bald. I might be a bald woman. And not a cute, pixie-haired, feminine woman with high cheekbones and a long neck with a dusting of hair that covers her scalp and shows off big pretty eyes. I might be a bald woman, head bicked and shiny, denuded. And I'm not yet 30. The first spot appears on the crown of my head as a sudden crop circle, perfectly round and unnervingly smooth, mystical in origin, revealing gleaming white skin. Dwindling brown trees. The shock of that first stress brings more circles—at the edge of the ear, above the left temple, at the back of the head with two small satellites orbiting them, ever widening, threatening to eat each other, like hungry Venn diagrams.

I'm going to inject you today, the paunchy, fifty-ish Upper East Side dermatologist says to his clipboard as I sit down. I've barely crinkled the paper on the soot-colored exam table when he says this. *Nothing can be done, short of steroid shots to the scalp,* he clarifies, glancing up at me.

It's a spring day, and I was caught in a sudden downpour, am conscious of the dilating pool around my umbrella on the dermatologist's floor. I stop swinging my feet, cross my ankles.

Steroid shots in my head? I ask. Which holds my brain? I want to add, but don't.

When he nods at me, slowly, like I might be a bit stupid, then adds that 50 percent of cases result in hair regrowth after the shots, and 50 percent result in hair regrowth *without* the shots—as if this should reassure me—I make some ungainly apologies, scuttle out of the exam room, wave goodbye to the receptionist in the sunny, floral print dress who stands as if to stop me.

On the subway to work, I think about the nervous system. The unseen tree inside the body. Delicate branches, tender vines. It's better to take on life as a bald woman than side effects that can damage more than vanity. My fingers drift to my head as I think this. I worry that my spots are showing.

I knew these spots when I first felt them. Maya had them once, but they vanished after steroid treatments. Was I being silly, worrying about my brain? Maya was a lawyer, after all, and her brain seemed just fine.

"Anyone know anything about alopecia areata treatment?" I update on Facebook, trying to sound innocent enough, casual, to obscure my stifled panic.

"Try onions. Mashed onions," comes my cousin's curious response from India. We haven't seen each other since I was eleven. Eighteen years. A whole other grownup ago.

I decide not to go to a doctor again, decide on weekly sessions with acupuncture students. I go to students because even though I'm kicking ass at my job now, I'm still being paid like I'm bad at it.

At the start of my first session, I hand over my credit card to a smiley redhead with that elongated posture that makes me think of yoga. I remember how every day during my early months on the job, I would brace myself with the truth that that day could be the day I'd be fired. I try to breathe this truth out of my body.

I am led into a big room with sky-blue fabric dividers. Padded massage tables stretch before posters of the body's meridians, acupuncture and acupressure points. When the two white thirty-something-year-old students, with their Om necklaces and character tattoos, admit that they have never heard of alopecia areata, I tell them how two percent of the US population—

more than 4.5 million people, regardless of sex, age, or ethnicity—experiences the condition at some point in their lives.

I forgive the students when they do not believe that I have alopecia areata, when they give each other that knowing glance that asks if my issue isn't some other problem with my head. I remind myself that I do have so much hair, that I've learned to cover the spots. I forgive them when they are silent at the back of my head, where I can't see them but feel their shock when I let down my (remaining) hair. I feel their careful fingers part it like a lush forest that reveals achingly dry land. I try not to strain to hear them as they discuss a treatment plan outside the exam room, as I lie, belly down, with my face resting on a foam donut wrapped in tissue paper.

Once twenty-seven needles are in my head, which feels not unlike a pincushion, the aged Chinese acupuncturist comes in, holds my wrist, and says of my pulse to the growing number of students crowding around me, *The emotions. They are very unstable.*

I watch tears drop through the donut that is holding my face. A pool gathers on the floor beneath me, and I try to wipe my nose discreetly on that rim of tissue that my face is resting on. I try to be silent, to go somewhere other than my body.

I try to tell myself this isn't my fault. No one is judging me. Even though this is my body attacking itself, *I* am not doing this. I tell myself that my body and I just have to reconcile, be friends again.

I start to monitor the spots in the morning, to take pictures of them, to see phantom hair.

My lunar hair is white. It grows only in my sleep. These are the words that come to me in the evening.

Meanwhile, I sweep heaps of dark hair from the floor each day, wondering how there is anything left on my head. I am grateful I live alone.

I apply increasingly expensive tonics to the sites, take horrifically expensive supplements, go to nutritionists, chiropractors, reiki practitioners, kinesiologists, bioreprogrammers. I spend a fortune, tossing precious coins on dead soil. I try to meditate, to take care of myself and exercise and remind myself that this is just hair, I don't have cancer, this is not terminal. I beat myself up for being so vain.

What are wigs for? I ask my reflection cheerily in my medicine-cabinet mirror, trying to believe the papery front that I'm putting up for myself. Still, I feel the edges tear, then shred, feeling sad and weak and sorry for myself. Finally, I reach out to friends, listen hard to the one who holds me in an open field under a dark sky and says that the moon is bald and beautiful and I'll be beautiful bald too. I try not to cry at this, but do anyway.

All this begins around my 29th birthday, almost a year after ending a nearly decade-long relationship, a few months into finally doing really well at my job, and just as I decide to move five thousand miles back to Hawai'i to start again, that place where I feel drawn again for some reason I can't really articulate. Maybe I'm chasing the edges of Grandma's story. Maybe I'm looking for a home with enough space from my family who I love so much that I can mine caves, dive deep, feel the pressure of the ocean on my ear drums, to curl into that resolute silence. Regardless, it's in that moment, my toes curled over an optimistic cliff's edge, that my hair starts to fall out, just like that. When the stress of those months prior—of the broken heart and the fretting that lodges deep in my belly—is behind me, that's when the stress catches up. When I think I'm fine, better than fine, when the future is brimming with promises. That's when the body calls bullshit.

And so as I gather myself up, muster my energy for another tectonic shift, I pray for strength, for better stress management, for wholeness, for acceptance, but most of all, quietly, I pray for little hair saplings, which may never come.

The Folks Who'll Come to Your Funeral

The soonest they can see me is in ten days.

You have to establish care with a primary care physician, for insurance purposes, before you can see a specialist, a busy receptionist says through the phone.

I'm sitting here with my head in my hands, my phone jammed up against my face. My toes are ashy, frozen from a too-cold classroom. The trades rip through the jalousies of the open-air staircase. I'm sitting down.

I swallow that iron taste clawing at the back of my bleached tongue.

I don't think I can wait that long, I say quietly. *I might not make it*, I add with a laugh.

(I can be a touch dramatic.)

I list my symptoms on my fingertips. The pain. Going to the bathroom a dozen or so times a day. Red each time. How this has been going on for close to two months.

I feel like there isn't any blood left in my body, I say, laughing again.

I listen to the receptionist's tone change, her voice suddenly underwater as she cups the receiver to talk to someone else, perhaps someone who knows more than she does. When she turns her mouth back to the receiver, it feels like she's sitting right beside me.

You need to go to the emergency room, she says. The line goes quiet. She's waiting for a reply, maybe something that will tell her that I'm taking her seriously.

I hang up and check my phone for the time.

Ten minutes left of break.

I dial Mom in California, the nurse who worked in the ER for close to two decades, and tell her what the receptionist said.

Well, honey, go to the ER.

She sounds exasperated. She probably thinks this is the hardest she can push me if she wants me to listen.

Go get your little bag from your class and go, sweetheart, Mom says.

I tell her I'll go to urgent care to start. *It's not like I'm dying*, I reason.

Mom sighs, resigned, because she knows the more she pushes me to the hospital, the less likely I'll be to get there. She knows I distrust western medicine even though she is a nurse and Dad is a doctor. In fact she probably also knows that that might be a reason I distrust it. I grew up under my older sisters' branches. When we were small, our parents were like phantom shadows, disappearing in a bright sky. Something we learned: *Western medicine doesn't heal. It only covers symptoms.*

Ten minutes are up.

I head to the classroom of the graduate-level creative writing course I'm just halfway through, but my body lurches to the bathroom, where I bleed more, the pain increasing, seeming to be scolding me too. *I haven't eaten today*, I remember to myself, noting that I can't have triggered a food allergy. I haven't accidently consumed the gluten or dairy I gave up more than four months prior, or the nightshades or cane sugar or any of the other foods on my growing list of things to avoid that I've recently abstained from in hopes of healing myself. *More iron? Acupuncture? A nervous system realignment? More grounding? Rebounding? Sunshine?* I am still running, riding my bike to and from school, swimming almost daily, except in this past week, when I've been waking up and feeling like I might fall over.

I sit on the toilet for a while longer, waiting for my body to settle down, for my gut to empty whatever might be left inside it. A tiny window at the top of the bathroom wall frames a piece of a rainbow.

What am I missing? I ask myself.

I flush.

I recall what the bioreprogrammer said, the French woman who works to help people understand how patterns present as illnesses in the body, and how to interrupt those patterns. She'd said that blood is always about clan, and that it's usually about mothers. That I might need to forgive. That I need more of a spiritual connection, to build trust. To let go. Stop beating myself up. *Is it time to check out that Unitarian church, the one my chiropractor mentioned?* I ask myself. But I'm not Christian. My path to God has always been quiet, outside, and usually alone.

(What if my illness didn't mean anything at all? another voice asked me. What if I was just sick, and I just needed care. Could that be an option too? Maybe I just needed all the kinds of care I could get?)

At the sink, I watch water streak down my face, which I pat dry. I hide sunken eyes behind grown-out bangs, deciding to sit silently through the last half hour of class, telling Mom's voice in my head that waiting until 6 pm, sans dramatic exit, is fine, and urgent care is open until 8. I'll get to a doctor in plenty of time.

*

I rush out of class, make my wobbly, electrocuted-and-faulty-firing-synapses walk about a half-mile out of Mānoa Valley down to King Street to catch the #1 bus that drives all the way out to Hawai'i Kai. I arrive to Kahala Urgent Care and text my ex.

I'm worried about you, he says in words that surface on my screen, all the way from New York.

I swallow the ibuprofen I never take when the nurse says I have a fever. I catch my breath when the doc, without introducing herself, storms into the exam room and demands to know why I'm not at the hospital.

Has no one told you to go to the ER today? she asks with an expression that looks like Mom's.

You might be the third person who's told me that, I say with a shy smile.

So dramatic, all this.

The cab I take to the ER is impeccable. The nice driver man in the pressed suit walks around, opens the door, and closes it for me once I get in.

It's okay to go to the main entrance? he asks. *Only ambulances are allowed to the ER.* His eyes are apologizing to me in the rearview mirror.

When we arrive, he tells me to take good care of myself. I feel him watching me walk through the sliding glass doors like a worried dad.

Nice guy, I think to myself.

I swallow hard again.

I wait for four hours to see a doc. The man with the head injury goes ahead of me, as does the woman with the full body rash.

These are the people who belong in the ER, I tell myself. *Go right ahead,* I traffic-direct in my head.

My phone battery is almost dead. I laugh when I get a voicemail around 9 pm from my roommates, who I've lived with for the past six months that I've been in Hawai'i: *Anj, this is*

your roommates. You looked a little dead leaving the house this morning, and you're usually home by now. What's going on?

I text them back, say I'm fine, I'm at the ER but they'll probably just give me fluids and send me home. I'm touched when they freak out that I'm there alone, that I called a cab like a person without people.

After enough pleading on their end, I promise to text when I'm leaving so they can come get me, regardless of what time it is, even though I'm not sure I will.

When a few nurses check me out and let on that things are a bit more serious than I think, I send out a few texts to my family in California, to my ex, to my roommates, that I'm staying the night there, that I love them, just before my phone dies. I laugh at how dramatic this all is.

The ER is full to capacity. They give me a hall bed next to a man with a bad migraine when I'm finally admitted. They make me put on a dressing gown with small blue flowers on it, even though I'm in a sundress already and the man with the migraine doesn't have to wear one. I wonder if they're trying to assimilate me, make me understand by putting me in this drafty costume that I'm *not* just going to get fluids. I'm *not* going to be sent home.

I talk story with the migraine man a bit, who gets chatty in his Southern drawl, after his intravenous pain meds hit. He teases me, nags me in a way that reminds me of Mom about being sure to drink all that iodine-laced iced tea they've given me in preparation for my CT scan. He asks me if I'm all right when I come back from the bathroom once, twice, three times, where I throw it all up. Another nice guy.

When the nurse comes back to ask the migraine man how he's doing, he collapses back on the bed and starts complaining of pain again, begging for more meds. I see the fuss he makes about the too-weak prescription they're sending him home with. I look away when he struggles

to put on his jacket, stretching his arms over his head, his big moon belly revealed over the top of his pants all bare and pale. I wish him luck when he leaves, and mean it.

I feel hot tears sliding down my face again, feeling sorry for myself now, because there's no one other than the night nurses, who are understaffed, checking on me now and I'm alone and things are beginning to feel real.

I think about Grandma, who passed away the year prior and worked in a nearby hospital before the Second World War. She worked in the maternity unit before Pearl Harbor was bombed, and she helped to deliver babies. I try to think of Grandma and her gentle, warbling voice. I hold my own cold, feverish hand and pretend it's her warm, papery one. I tell myself that Grandma is there with me, that I'm not alone.

I try to focus on this thought instead of the round patch of blood my IV is dripping on my sheets, or how they've given me two bags of water and somehow I still don't have to pee.

I get wheeled over for the CT around 3 am. The wide swing of the bed around the corners of the abandoned, nighttime hospital corridors feel like a Disneyland ride. I want to say this to the nurse, the nice person who's been taking care of me even if he did make me bleed with that IV, but I keep it to myself.

You'll feel two things when the iodine goes through your vein, the CT man says. *First, it'll feel like a rush of wasabi through your body. Spicy*, he says. *Then, it'll feel like you made sheeshee.*

My eyebrows shoot up.

No worry. You won't. He smiles.

The CT scanner, with its space-age white plastic orb that surrounds me, takes just two minutes. The CT man is right. The wasabi rush comes, as does the feeling of peeing my pants. I

move from the CT scanner back to my bed, and the CT man changes the paper sheet that I was lying on. I hear his sharp inhale. My hand feels around self-consciously between my legs. But I'm dry.

Just kidding! the CT man says, pointing a gotcha finger at me.

CT humor.

At last, I get into a room where I can sleep. It's 4 am. A nice night nurse checks my vitals and talks story with me a bit. She touches my cold feet, puts socks on them. I'm so grateful for her and start to tell her as much until she peels back my thin blanket, releasing my most fragile, thinnest skin of heat that has been my only barrier against the deep freeze of the hospital.

This is too much, I start to say. I mean that this is too much, too real, too scary, too alone. I need this blanket at least. But then she stretches across me a warmed blanket and replaces the first one on top of it. Warmth washes over me like a deep, all-encompassing hug.

Maybe that's the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me, I say with a deep, smiling sigh.

The nurse chuckles.

I don't sleep much, with the nurses coming every few hours to check my vitals, during which they gasp, without fail, at how low my resting blood pressure is.

I'm a runner, I mutter to them groggily. *I just have to sit up*.

I'm astonished at how frequently they come to draw blood. I wonder, this time more seriously, at how I have any left in my body. I call my family collect on the white landline to update them, to ask them to update each other. I give out the hospital number. I am surprised when Joya, the at-home free-birther who loathes western medicine even more than I do, says she's happy I'm in a place where I'm getting care.

I tell her about the phone session I had a couple days before with the bioreprogrammer. I start to cry again, tell Joya I worry about her, she who is my second mom. I tell her that I worry about her and her husband. And I worry about her relationship with our mom, who Joya has been fractured from up until very recently.

Don't, Joya says, like stopping is as simple as a contraction. *We're fine*.

*

With daylight sharp and high over the green ridge of the Ko'olau mountains out my hospital window, my mind spreads open like a fan. I remember I have my computer, and that hospitals have wireless. I learned that when our stepdad, David, was dying at Huntington Hospital in Pasadena two years prior. I'd spent nights with him so Mom could go home and rest, listening to his ventilator as I curled up on a small padded window seat, writing out grant proposals for the nonprofit in New York I worked for because that was all I could do to keep from crying my eyes out, not understanding how cancer could so quickly take this strong man from our family when up until the end, days before he was hospitalized and began to wither to bone, he still rode dozens of miles daily on his bicycle. When I'd arrived to the hospital, David's withered, skeletal body came to life. His vacant gaze, directed at the doorway, registered me in his vision. I hadn't told him I was coming. *Anjoli!* he'd said. *What a nice surprise!* And then, just like that, his vision was blank again. Jay, his younger son, has said that that was the most David had said in days. It was a miracle. A kind of a miracle. That was before Mom, Dad, Maya, and I found ourselves joining hands instinctively in a circle with David as he drew his last breaths, us crying quietly, him rattling out his last shaky breaths like stones. The circle was spontaneous. Ancient, maybe, and true. Helping David let go felt like standing with rows and rows of ancestors in the

darkness. It felt like when Joya birthed slippery babies into the birthing tub at our home against an endless black sky.

Back in Honolulu, with my laptop in my hands, I start shooting out updates on Facebook. I remember that today is February 14, the first Valentine's I've spent single and alone in nearly a decade since my ex and I first started dating.

I update about how this is the worst Valentine's Day ever but say that maybe that's just because I've had so many good ones, trying to sound cheery and fine and not at all in the hospital even though the doc has come to see me and said they need to keep me for several days, maybe a week, depending on how long it takes for the bleeding to slow down at least.

I surprise myself with how easily I submit to high doses of intravenous steroids. I refused injections for my alopecia areata the year prior, after all. But I forgot those smooth, round patches of perfectly bald scalp skin dilating on my head when my stomach started to hurt and I started to bleed, and losing hair became the most trivial concern ever.

On the third day in the hospital, the gastroenterologist, Dr. Lim, gives my pain a name: ulcerative colitis. Another autoimmune condition. Another incident of the body hurting itself, thinking itself foreign, attacking otherwise healthy cells.

I remember that the immune system lives in our bone marrow. I picture white blood cells as confused soldiers with bad information, killing their own family members, rushing out of bone trenches in an unending, confused stream, charging toward the slaughter.

There isn't a way to stop this, Dr. Lim tells me.

So they treat the symptoms, I tell myself. In this case, the symptoms are severe enough to need treating, though, I reason with myself. This isn't a pain pill for a mild headache. Accepting

this treatment isn't laziness. I've tried everything else I know of. I need help. I try to let this realization wrap around myself in a hug. I try to tell myself not to judge myself.

Dr. Lim tells me I will be on drugs for the rest of my life. *This drug*, he says, *is like throwing sand on a tar fire*. He gives me the name of this forever drug, which I promptly forget.

I tell Dad all this when he calls and prods me for information.

I tell him I don't remember the name of the drug but repeat that simile about the tar fire for him, because that's what stuck in my English graduate-student brain.

We're sending your mother, he says in his doctor voice.

And then the parade begins.

My neighbor Roxy is the first. When she surprises me by stopping by with a stuffed monkey and soduku, I cry and can't stop myself. I apologize, telling her that I'm so happy she's there. She stays and visits and scolds me for not calling her for a ride to the ER at least, for letting things go for so long—because that's how it looks from the outside to folks who go to western doctors first. They don't see how I'd been trying everything else, that I'd been actively trying to heal myself. She offers to check up on my worm box, to water my plants.

Bryan finds out through Facebook message. He asks about my self-pitying Valentine's Day post and I tell him I'm in Queens.

New York? he asks mildly, because if I were still with my ex, I probably would have flown to be with him over Valentine's Day. When I correct him, say, *Queens Hospital*, he shows up what feels like moments later with poems and conversation, as does dear-one Aiko, who climbs into my bed and hugs and kisses and scolds me for not telling her earlier that I was in trouble.

My roommates Ryndell and Elise come too and sit on either side of my bed with legs crossed, beautiful as siren sentinels, and gossip with me about crushes and love.

Sahoa brings flowers and charm all the way from Wahiawā.

Dax brings a flashdrive that's the shape of a penguin and has all the rom-coms I could possibly want to watch plus the episodes of the trash TV I've missed. He says he wants to sign whatever waiver he needs to qualify for giving me emergency rides to the hospital.

Christina looks down at me in my bed like I am a dark face at the bottom of a pond and says, *Get better*, as a command (because it's hurting her to see me like this, and she loves me).

Eri comes in the evening and brings night-colored nail polish from Kāne'ohe to paint my toes and pass the time. She brings me an avocado from her yard and it is the most delicious thing I have ever eaten.

Even my roommates' friend, Sarah, who I'm not very close to yet, comes to smile at and hug me.

Mrs. Manghnani, an aunty of mine, braves the drive from Hawai'i Kai even though she's just had cataract surgery.

My officemate Lyz, and the beautiful, storytelling No'u also come, and then even Roxy's husband arrives in bike shorts and keeps his helmet on throughout his visit as he reads the books my other friends have brought.

When I've been put back on a clear liquid diet, I am so sad I can't drink the green juice my dear friend Marion brings. The peppermint aromatherapy spray she hands me makes me feel fresh and alive, welcoming me back to my body with a glimpse of pleasure instead of just the pain I'd come to focus on.

And the man who I've been practicing being in love with comes too. He stops by more than once, one time even before I've gotten my teeth brushed. He climbs into bed with me in a way that tells me I'm not plagued, looks through the art books he's brought, and leaves me with a book of his childhood poems that makes me swoon.

And so my dams break and I come out on Facebook that I am, in fact, in the hospital. Then the deluge comes, via chats and texts and phone calls and messages from India from Piyali, my cousin who suffers from gastritis and thus connects to this pain I'm feeling, and kisses blown to me from Mānoa Valley and all the flowers, it feels like, that the island of O'ahu has to give continue to shower me despite how my mother has flown out from California to care for me.

She's come to get all the medical facts that I can't keep in my sieve of a brain and to check on me and love me and let me know she's okay so I can stop worrying and to make sure I'm okay too.

She's astonished at my constant stream of visitors, at how even my PhD department's Acting Chair comes to bring me flowers.

Is this a Hawai'i thing? she asks.

I shrug, tell her I'm not sure, that I feel overwhelmed. So much love.

On the first night that Mom is here, I try to convince her to sleep in my bed with me since there are no roll-aways in the hospital for visitors. I plead a little with her since the one cushioned chair in my room doesn't recline and she refuses to stay at Mrs. Manghnani's house, where she's agreed to stay, because she doesn't want to leave me just yet. I recognize that her nurse's training is what is making it impossible for her to lie down with me.

I listen to her when she says beds are for patients. I let her convince me that she's fine as she pushes together a few of the plastic chairs to the one that doesn't recline and builds a bed

with extra pillows and blankets. I try not to worry about her more-than-sixty-year-old body falling in her sleep as she curls up on this little mound, looking impossibly small and fragile. I let myself feel her here and love her, feel myself forgive her for moving out of our house when we were small. I feel my plastic pillows, covered in scratchy hospital-grade cotton, gathering small, salty splotches. I watch her sleep.

I have one of my worst nights in the hospital. I'm not able to tell her this just yet, but I get up every hour or so to bleed. I am so happy she's here, with me, loving on me. I tell myself to accept this love from her, let it wash over me.

When Mom has to fly back to California before I am discharged, Maya, the lawyer, the no-mess-around one, flies out to sort out payment processes, legal matters, and most important to look me in the face and make sure I'm okay the weekend after I'm released from my full-week hospital stay.

After we've had our long hug hello and rented a car and driven to the north shore, where I begin, slowly, to thaw the hospital out of my bones, I announce to her happily what I've learned about my overwhelming parade of visitors:

These are the folks who'll come to my funeral, I say.

Wasn't this a game we played? When we were being sad kids and feeling dramatic? We'd think about who would care if we were gone, who would show up to cry, who would miss us and feel a gaping hole in themselves if we were gone. It was a game that all melodramatic kids played, wasn't it? The ultimate and terribly mean way to get back at folks for not loving on you enough when you were around? Or something?

She surprises me when she looks at me a bit angrily, like this is a cheap thing to say. She looks at me the way all of our loved ones have been looking at me for getting sick and not telling

them sooner, for not seeing a (western) doctor and getting (western) medicine before I got this bad. She looks at me from behind her glasses with her worried, loving, furrowed face before glaring at the smooth hand of the ocean.

I feel the delicious noonday sun that hovers directly above us. I feel my shadow tucked inside of me, my body's heat all collected. I watch Maya's face, silhouetted against the bright white light on the water, and want to curl up with her the way I did when we were kids, when she'd let me climb down to her bed.

My heart clenches when I watch her keep her now-brimming eyes directed at the horizon, on the ocean's great palm, when she concedes, *Yes, they're the ones who'll come to your funeral. And then some.*

I feel the forever pills in my bag, the supplements at home in my dresser drawer, the vegetables in my garden. I feel all the little pieces of our sometimes-broken, always-loving family. I feel the warm expanse of generous friends. I feel the sun on my face.

I feel what Maya is saying and understand, of course. These are the folks who'll come to my funeral, but it's not time to die yet.

Love Letter to Kurseong

I wasn't expecting to fall in love with Kurseong. From what I'd heard about our father's childhood, this mountain town in West Bengal was a sad place where he was sent, in 1946, as a four-year-old who had fallen so far into despair over losing his beloved dadu that he was sent away for four years, until he was eight years old, until our thakurda got a job abroad and our family relocated to North Carolina in 1950 for good.

"I thanked your thakurma later," he told me, shaking a strong fist, "for sending me away and making me become a man. She'd just hang her head, though, when I said that." He'd shrug with that last line, like it was silly for her to feel bad for sending her baby away.

"She didn't want to do it?" I asked.

"Her sisters made her, I think."

So he was sent away to boarding school, 4,680-odd feet in the sky on the very top of a very tall segment of the Himalayas, 364 miles from home in Calcutta, where his older brother, mother, and father continued living before Partition.

During those four years in Kurseong, Dad only returned to his family for holidays. The school itself, called Dow Hill, was actually a Scottish girls' school at the time and, like the ones in the segregated southern US he'd later encounter, it was mostly white. It was only because he and his cousin were the nephews of their masi Bijoya, who taught history there, that they were admitted.

I cannot say that our dad's time in Dow Hill was happy. He was still grieving his deceased grandfather, who was his best friend, when he was torn from his family to go to this boarding school, which was a whole other kind of loss. And so he lived among a clutch of 1940s

Scottish-descended teenage girls who felt entitled to make little-Indian-boy bodies do to them what they pleased.

"I used to get in trouble for eating rotten fruits. And for scraping chocolate off the floor to eat." He would run his fingernail across dry air when he said this, then laugh.

"Bijoya would strike me with bamboo switches!" he would say with another laugh, slicing the space between us. "I wasn't starving, though. I've seen pictures of myself. I had full cheeks." This last bit added, as if to dull the blade.

We'd grown up with our dad telling these offhand stories. In a sense, they were what called us to Kurseong. My desire was to unhook these hurting bits from our dad's heart that he'd carried with him for maybe his whole life—hurting bits that my sisters and I might be carrying too.

"It wasn't that bad though," he told me over masala cha one morning. "I was so little, what did I know?"

All along, I had thought Kurseong would feel haunted, that I would want to track someone down. I joked about wanting to punch someone (not our long-dead thakurma or our aunties, of course . . . but those girls, maybe).

So when we arrived to Bagdogra, the nearest airport, I wasn't expecting to breathe in the green of the Himalayas on a slow switchback climb past towering mango trees with their hard, sour fruits, aching to be pickled, or to find myself falling toward the gentle tumble of the Balasan River, where village kids dove headlong into rushing waters, or to swoon for long cloudy views of terraced tea gardens, or the signs warning drivers to give way to drunken elephants who regularly plundered tribal people's fermented corn and grain, or to be given access to the storytelling of our generous guide and driver, Sabin, who told us about growing up the son of a

mother who secreted sacks of the best tea to dry, twist, and ferment at home, because folks who work the land should have the best of what they labor for. I wasn't expecting stories of the ironwood trees called Tarika that shrunk as they aged and looked like the hala I knew from living in O'ahu, becoming more dense and sounding like stone when they were cut for long-lasting firewood, or the cicadas that told local kids when it was playtime (they were loudest in the morning), or, how our dad and other mountain kids would venture into the forests to collect massive toy-block-sized, flying beetles to battle to the death. I wasn't expecting Kurseong, known for its azaleas, the land of the white orchids.

As we wandered into our umpteenth stop on the side of the road, mid-climb to the Cochrine Hotel, Sabin handed me, wordlessly, a flat string of lemongrass for the mosquitoes he saw me itching away.

I wasn't expecting any of this.

When we arrived to Dow Hill School, I *was* expecting the chills I got later as we walked past the dorms, as I gazed into the faces of the older teachers, as the current headmistress told us that she had no records to show us of the kids Dad went to school with, even though we all knew that these old colonial schools hold onto every single paper they write on.

When we finished the tour of Dow Hill and the school's guide left us, Dad and I gravitated toward a large puddle turned reflection pond inside the school's gates on a gravel roadway. D stood just behind us but instinctively a ways off to give us privacy as Dad and I considered the Victorian-style school before us. It looked massive. Clouds misted across it, erasing buildings and clumps of trees, only to reveal them and take them away again.

Dad was visibly uncomfortable. Maybe he was thinking about the mountain. About wanting to make it to Darjeeling before the rain. About wanting to descend a bit out of this cloud

before we lost light or the roads got too slick. He'd angled his body toward the front gate, toward Sabin, who brought us there. He was clamping down, this much I knew from being his daughter. He didn't want to talk about this anymore, which meant I had to let go my desire to exorcise this place from our father's heart.

"You know," Dad said, surprising me when he broke the silence. He was looking up at Dow Hill School. "It taught me to objectify women."

"Objectify?" I blurted out. I knew the "it" he was talking about. Years before, when I'd asked him directly about what I suspected had happened to him at Down Hill, he had told me. ("You know, when your dad told me about those things, I always thought he was bragging," Mom had told me months later. "But he was so young," I'd said. "*Four* to *eight* years old." I watched tears darken her cheeks, falling on folded hands. She hadn't understood. Sometimes it's easier to see the bravado than the chasms the fractures split wide open. This misunderstanding, a forever fissure between them. I caught myself feeling for them both, failed lovers. What happens when we don't really hear each other? How does that fracture, those great distances, split us all wide open?)

Objectify? Dad had never talked about Dow Hill like this to me before. I felt the impulse, not unlike the one in Joya's birthing rooms, to keep still, calm, not to trouble the water, to let him push this story out of himself on his own without feeling like he had to take care of my emotions. But it didn't make sense, what he was saying. Wasn't *he* the one treated like an object?

"Well, yes?" he added, maybe a little unsure of himself. "It made me think that's all women wanted. Or wanted from me."

When the clouds rolled in, bleaching everything around us like a bright white screen, he shrugged hard, maybe not to communicate that he didn't know so much as to shake the story out of and off him.

I saw him more fully, in just a flash, the Dad who I loved and had gotten to know in my adult years, who took us bratty kids everywhere on his business trips, who was an enigma to me until I had gotten to know him as an adult, who was so resoundingly there for me when I did find him all those years later as an adult. I saw him in that moment as a father to daughters, as the exhusband to an exwife who still loved him in her own way. I saw him as the little boy sent up into the mountains who found play in forests even as he was betrayed, who found a story to tell that helped him feel in control even as it rendered him the one at fault, he the one who reflected on the narrow pathway of his life and found shortcoming in himself when actually he was the one wronged, who had been made to do things to girls twice his age when he was far too young to understand even what it meant.

I stepped back and hugged him around the narrowest part of his torso, my hands resting on top of his belly. I pressed my ear to his back and listened to his heart thump.

"Oh, this gut of mine!" he said.

When he smacked his belly, the moment shattered like water, as perhaps it had to.

D appeared from the periphery, where I found out later he'd been taking pictures of us: me, the half-Bengali daughter standing awkwardly and looking very American in a mismatched kurti and leggings, eyes downcast, my thumbs hooked into backpack straps; I don't know if Dad looks any more Indian than I do, but he's standing akimbo, confronting the school with what might have been a scowl on his face. It's hard to tell from the camera's angle and I can't recall since I wasn't looking at him, but that's how I see his face in this moment in my mind.

Looking back, I know that all of this helped. We hadn't come to collect ledgers to name names, to seek vengeance, or to clutch pain and hurt close to our hearts. We'd come to look this space in the face, to find those pieces Dad left in the forest and in this school as a child, and to hold them close, to tell them that they are not lost, that we carry them with us, and that they are safe now. That we love them. That we are loved.

Maybe that's how love works. Waiting for us after sixty-plus years, filled with all these things we don't expect, in what could be the most unsuspecting and devastatingly beautiful places.

Mixed in India

I don't speak a South Asian language. I was raised without any real South Asian cultural traditions. Dad left India when he was eight and mom's white. Much of what I "know" about the subcontinent I learned in college courses.

Those are the facts I'd learned to rattle off when encountering other South Asian people, or people who wanted to talk to me about South Asia and what they assumed I felt about my identity as a South Asian person. A rip of the proverbial Bandaid so they quickly knew how little I knew. I wasn't the Indian they were looking for.

And yet, when I first started this two-month scholarship to uncover my family history in India, I hoped to glimpse a feeling of belonging. After all, I *am* Indian. Or half. Whatever that means.

"You are looking so much like your mother!" my cousin Piyali-didi said to me almost immediately upon my arrival to Kolkata.

I thought it might be my recent haircut, a sloppy bob that looks a little like mom's short, permed hair from her last visit to India back in the 80s. Or maybe it was ombre thing I'd done to lighten the tips.

"It's in your shoulders," she clarified. "Joya-didi is so tiny," she said of my eldest sister. "She is obviously Indian, an Indian beauty. You are all beautiful. You and Maya, you two are mixed."

Later, on a flight from Delhi to Bagdogra, the security officer in the "ladies" screening line stopped me. She looked at my passport, at my face, and then back at my passport, trying to reconcile my appearance with the markers embedded in my name.

"Is your husband Bengali, madam?"

"No. My *father* is," I said, most likely sounding like a child. *"I* am."

Racial confusion became a lasting motif in our journey, and not just for me. Dad, though recognized as Indian was often mistaken for being South Indian, and D, who is Hawaiian, Chinese, Filipino, white, and Cherokee, experienced his fair share of racial confusion in India too, mostly in humorous and loving ways. So few people who we encountered could even find Hawai'i on a map.

"Is that near Cuba?" our guide in Delhi asked me when D was out of earshot.

When we arrived in Kurseong, we walked single file as we were used to doing to avoid cars on sidewalk-less roads. A mother cloud had wrapped herself around rain-soaked, green hills, and we were so dazed and grateful to have escaped what had become Delhi's dusty 118-degree heat that I didn't notice when an uncle flew out of his house and was all over D, exclaiming in an unfamiliar language that might have been Tibetan or Nepali, smiling and hugging him tight and rubbing his hand all over D's belly and chest, the way that chummy men sometimes do when they're teasing each other. When I turned toward the commotion, the man spoke to me in what was probably Bengali, emphatically trying to communicate. Eventually he gave up and smiled at us, and we, stunned, laughed and caught back up with Dad.

"Maybe he was saying that you looked like his son," I said. "Maybe he's part Chinese too?" I resisted the urge to take D's hand—PDA still being a no-no—and instead flashed him a big smile.

D looked confused.

*

For me, the most pronounced moment of racial confusion came at Amer Fort in Jaipur, which we visited before seeing the Taj Mahal on another short break from our family-research work in the Delhi archives. As we crossed the car to the queue for the elephant rides through the sun gate, we saw a thick of hawkers, selling sandalwood figurines, postcards, and garnet necklaces.

"Don't talk to them," our guide had warned us in the car. "They are like honeybees. More will only come if you do."

The problem is, I'm not really good at ignoring people, walking blithely past them as if they aren't there, as if they aren't human, all those things that capitalism tells tourists to think when they visit countries that force them to check their privilege.

"No, thank you," I said to the man handing me a wood carving of Ganesh. Perhaps because of my foreigner's voice, or an American tell in my walk, or my lack of confidence in how I wore my salwar, dollar signs flashed above my head and a fleet of hawkers clustered around me, as the guide had warned. Up ahead, I saw similar clusters around D and Dad, who walked with their heads down, their hands saying no.

The Ganesh figurine seller asked me in English if I spoke Hindi. I shook my head, embarrassed as I am whenever someone asks me about speaking a South Asian language. I felt that itch at the back of my head. Sure, Dad grew up in the segregated US South and never spoke Bengali to us and even now speaks it like an eight-year-old. But still. Why have I *still* not studied a South Asian language? What does it mean to write my family's history in English? How can I tell decolonizing stories when my own *mouth* is still colonized? How can I claim an Indian identity at all when I'm only half, when my closest connection to India is my father's maacher jhol, dahl, papadum? How could I think that in coming to India I'd feel like anything other than a tourist?

"200 rupees!" called the man with the necklaces, holding out a blue stone strand. "150!"

"¿Español?" the Ganesh figurine vendor asked a bit tentatively when I stopped responding.

I smirked at being asked this familiar question in India of all places. It was in LA, in New York, that I most expect this question, when I most expect to be mistaken for Latina. In India and in this initial moment, it felt a little like a joke at first. "Poquito," I muttered over my shoulder with a smile. D and I climbed onto an elephant that started ambling away from the vendors. I was just shy of a minor in Spanish at NYU, was accustomed to being mistaken for Latina, but it didn't quite hit me yet what was going on.

Do elephants sweat? I wondered, wiping my forehead.

"¡Español!" the hawker cried loud enough for the other hawkers around him. The exclamation carried through the crowd and the hawkers started exclaiming in Spanish, with the same fluidity as they had in English plus newfound enthusiasm, as if someone had flipped the channel to Spanish-language television.

"¡Bonita!"

"¡Un regalo para tu madre!"

"¡Guapa!"

"¡Ven! ¡Ven!"

"¡Algo especial!"

Was I really being mistaken for Latina, IN INDIA?? I was crushed, tears clipping my vision, and, because I didn't know about how that time of year was a common time for tourists from Spain to visit, I was also genuinely confused.

I focused on Moata Lake, which hugged the fort, and the patterned green gardens at the water's edge, my heart flopping in my chest. As our elephant eased up the incline to the fort, I read a sign that said that there used to be banyan trees all along the shore. D and I took turns taking pictures of the painted elephants heading back down the hill. I noticed that the Indian woman and her son, presumably, who were on the elephant in front of us, had been spared the swarm of hawkers. I noticed that said hawkers had given up on us as well and we had a moment of quiet now.

As we turned a switchback to the sun gate, we talked a bit—us asking questions, the driver answering in curt single syllables—as a photographer who had stationed himself on a craggy hill to take tourist photos and identified himself as Ali Baba implored us to "Kiss kiss! Look here! Remember my face! I will meet you after!"

We gave up on conversation as we edged to the entrance. I wondered how many times the elephants had to make this slow, hot stretch up and down the hill to the entrance to the fort, until they finished, mercifully, before the midday heat. I felt bad for looking forward to this elephant ride, for mistaking tourism for connection.

I watched two men mount a motorcycle at the entrance to the gate. The second one hopped on behind his friend and asked me where I was from.

"California," I said.

"¿Español?"

I shook my head this time.

"You have an Indian face," he said over his shoulder as his motorcycle revved down the hill.

The zing of this acceptance ran through me.

"I like you!" he added.

The zing dissipated.

*

As my two-month trip to the fatherland came to a close, D returned to Hawai'i and my dad and I visited family in Kolkata. In talking with my cousin Ranabir-dada, I mentioned that I was worried about making uncomfortable the introverted schoolchildren to whom his wife gave evening lessons in the bedroom where I was staying. I was a stranger, after all.

"You are fair and beautiful," Ranabir-dada said matter-of-factly. "They'll love you."

The recognition clanked around in my mind of how I would have been received differently in India had my mother been, say, black instead of white, if I had been darker. Images of the onslaught of "fairness" creams, including armpit-whitening deodorants that played on repeat during sleepy, monsoon afternoons, to the "intimate washes" that demand that even your vulva be pale, crowded my vision. From my cousins' air-conditioned car on the way to and from Gariahat market, I saw more keenly the larger-than-life advertisements of impossibly moon-faced, smiling women lording over the brown-skinned folks who gathered on the sidewalk for the next Tata non-AC bus.

I watched Kolkata swirl around me just as I was within it, understanding that blending in was on the surface of a deeper dream. I hadn't come to be swallowed whole. I'd come to spend time with family, cracking jokes and telling stories. I'd come to plumb carefully my father's forested, mountain-town boarding school with him, talking story with open-hearted people about India's independence from colonial rule, the heartbreak of Partition and the painful legacy of communalism. I'd come for these visions for the future. I'd come for learning what folks my age are doing on the ground to make connections and bridge tribal and urban communities in mindful,

reciprocal ways, and having conversations about parallels between independence movements in India and South Africa. I'd come for the privilege to dig through the Delhi and Chandigarh archives and find my inspiring, freedom-fighting great grandfather who might have otherwise been lost to our family, to time.

And, though I didn't know it at the time, the stories that this trip would uncover, yet unrevealed, would feed us all in ways I didn't yet know.